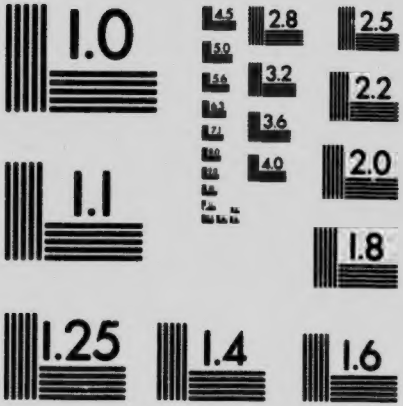


MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

LADYFINGERS

BY JACKSON GREGORY

LADYFINGERS
Illustrated by W. Herbert Dunton

THE BELLS OF SAN JUAN
Illustrated by Frank Tenney Johnson

JUDITH OF BLUE LAKE RANCH
Illustrated by W. Herbert Dunton

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

From his worn volume of lyrics Ashe read to her

LADYFINGERS

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

AUTHOR OF "THE BELLE OF BAR [illegible] "KING OF BLUE LAKE RANCH"
"THE JOYOUS [illegible]" "SIX FEET FOUR,"

ILLUSTRATED BY
W. HERBERT DUNTON

TORONTO
GEORGE J. McLEOD, LTD.
PUBLISHERS

From his work, Volume of Lyrics, Ashe [illegible]

LADYFINGERS

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

AUTHOR OF "THE BELLS OF SAN JUAN," "JUDITH OF BLUE LAKE RANCH" "THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER," "SIX FEET FOUR,"

ILLUSTRATED BY

W. HERBERT DUNTON

TORONTO

GEORGE J. McLEOD, LTD.

PUBLISHERS

METROPOLITAN
TORONTO
LIBRARY

Literature

COPYRIGHT, 1920, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published May, 1920

813.52
G 677.2

Printed in the United States of America.

MAR 2 8 1979

To

OUR DEAR AUNT NETTIE

MARTINETTE KINSELL

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THAT THERE MAY

BE OF GOOD IN RACHEL STETHERIL

WITH MUCH LOVE AND

A VERY SINCERE

ADMIRATION

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	The Gangster's Daughter	1
II.	The Stranger's Offer	12
III.	Ladyfingers	22
IV.	Heredity and Environment	35
V.	The Love of Polly Le Brun	44
VI.	The Stetheril Diamond	59
VII.	The Fugitive	69
VIII.	Change of Scene	78
IX.	The Tale of Old Man Beeson	85
X.	The Old Black Witch	92
XI.	Who Got the Diam[illegible]	110
XII.	The Heiress and the Thief	118
XIII.	Witch or Fairy Godmother?	126
XIV.	The Great Adventure	137
XV.	Karma	152
XVI.	White Roses and a Theft	160
XVII.	The Stetheril Millions and a Tip from Their Owner	174
XVIII.	The Touching of Hands	180
XIX.	An Ultimatum	196
XX.	The Methods of Rachel Stetheril, Millionairess	207
XXI.	Evelyn Revels in Mystery	214
XXII.	Haddon's Grip Tightens	223
XXIII.	To Crack a Safe . . . or Run?	232

Contents

		PAGE
XXIV.	In the Blood	244
XXV.	The Warning of Polly Le Brun	253
XXVI.	In the Darkness	260
XXVII.	Polly Le Brun Squares the Game	275
XXVIII.	And Goes to See What's Next	287
XXIX.	Silence	293
XXX.	How a Change Came About	299
XXXI.	"We Have No Right!"	310
XXXII.	The Man-Made Game	319
XXXIII.	The Wrath of Rachel Stetheril	325
XXXIV.	The Decision of Ladyfingers	336
XXXV.	The House in the Wood	349
XXXVI.	The Path to the Door	357

ILLUSTRATIONS

From his worn volume of lyrics Ashe read to her *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"You'd play fast and loose with me, would you?" . . 16

Warned in time, breaking through the shrubbery, a fugitive with his name shouted after him 66

"You let that boy go! I don't care the snap of my fingers what he's done!" 270

LADYFINGERS

CHAPTER I

THE GANGSTER'S DAUGHTER

JOE LE BRUN stared speechlessly at the two men whose insistent knocking had brought him out of his bed at three o'clock in the morning. They, ragged nondescripts, who had flitted in from the rainy streets like great bats upon rag wings, looked at him expectantly out of their hard eyes.

"You know what you're talking about, Tony? You're [illegible]?"

The words finally came abruptly, seeming to be ejected upward and outward by the heavy paunch contracting visibly under Le Brun's nightdress.

Tony, the smaller, thinner, more sinister of the two messengers, nodded briefly. He drew his coat closer about him; then finding that even thus he could not shut out the cold, moved in a peculiarly catlike way to the stove, which was still warm, and dropped a lump of coal into it. The other man followed him, stretching out his hands to the little warmth. Joe Le Brun, without moving his heavy body beyond the spasmodic contraction of his stomach, let his eyes travel after them, his fat, evil face showing a continued congestion of his empurpled wrath.

"Who did it?" he demanded.

Tony, with one quick gesture, lifted his narrow shoulders in a shrug and slipped out of his wet coat to hold it close to the stove. Le Brun turned to the second man.

"Who did it, Frank?" he asked.

Frank laughed unpleasantly.

"We didn't," he said. "We got there on time, about ten minutes past two. The lights was on and we could see there was something doing. The safe was cracked, the stuff was gone and all me and Tony done was get pinched."

"Pinched?" yelled Le Brun, a keen excitement shining in his eyes. "Pinched? It was a plant, was it? A double cross, was it? Ambrose thinks he can go back on us. . . ."

"Ambrose is all right," interrupted Tony, lifting a fleeting, slantwise look from his coat. "It was that new cop that got fresh and did the pinching act. Then Ambrose showed up and told us to beat it. He said tell you he'd be around here as soon as he could get away."

"How much was in the safe?" asked Le Brun. "Did you get a chance to talk with Labelle?"

Tony grinned mirthlessly.

"Labelle was nuts over it," he said succinctly. "He'd done his part and put the stuff in it and thought everything was running right until me and Frank showed up. Even then he wouldn't believe at first. He thought we were holding out on him. You can look for Labelle too, most any time."

"Hell!" exploded Le Brun.

Suddenly he seemed for the first time to feel the cold. Clawing his nightshirt together over his bulging chest he drew close up to the stove. The flux of color had receded slowly from his bloated visage, but no abatement of ferocity came into his eyes, small, round blazing points of light under his hairless brows.

"You know who did this," he said after a little.

"No more than you know," returned Tony. "No more than Ambrose knows, or Labelle. No more," with a sneer twisted suddenly into his voice, a flash of light in his eyes, "than Polly knows!"

"Polly?" growled Le Brun. "What's Polly got to do with it?"

Tony stared back at his chief a trifle sullenly.

"You ain't asking all the puzzle questions tonight, Joe," he said sharply. "How'd it happen that the guy that cracked the safe knew just when Labelle was going to put the coin in it? How'd it happen he didn't do the job last night? Why didn't he wait till tomorrow night? You say we got a guess coming who done it. Maybe we got a guess coming who wised him up, too!"

Joe Le Brun's thick hands grew into loose, flabby
His body seemed actually dilating with venom;
eyes spat poison.

"It was Ashe's work," he said finally. "And we all know it. But that's no sign that Polly tipped him off. It was just luck or he found out some other way. Polly wasn't in on this."

Under Le Brun's malicious eyes Tony's open sneer was slowly veiled by his old air of sullenness.

"How did Ambrose talk?" asked Le Brun.

"He's sore. He's got a right to be sore. He don't know if it was Ashe or if we did it and are trying to shut him out of the money."

Through the windowless, dimly lighted room there drifted an atmosphere of uneasiness which was almost like a palpable San Francisco fog. Both Tony and Frank looked to Le Brun eagerly. Le Brun, deeply thoughtful, was unconscious of their looks, having another matter to think upon. It was before anyone had again spoken that from the wet night without there came the sound of a man walking hurriedly. He turned the corner, approaching from Howard Street, passed the front doors of Joe Le Brun's saloon and came on quickly until he was at the smaller, shadow-hidden door which gave entrance from the sidewalk into the room in which the three men were.

"It's Ambrose," offered Tony. As a sharp knock followed he added, "Better go easy, Joe." Then, stooping forward swiftly, his movement one of feline softness, he said under his breath, "If Polly ain't working for Ladyfingers you better play her against Ambrose now. He'll fall for her."

"Shut up!" snapped Joe.

He opened the door and Ambrose came in with a haste which gave color to the impression that he had been hurled into the little room by the raging wind which battered at the board walls after him and then went its baffled way, howling furiously about the street corners.

Even in plain clothes something about the man, be it the look in his cruel blue eyes or about his hard jaw and mouth, be it something in the erect swagger

of his carriage, proclaimed him the pol' ..ncer. His movements were the quick, watchfu. .onfident movements of his class, his air that of .is type, domineering, a little short of dominant. There was a sens· of power about him; already lieutenant of police he looked forward to a speedy promotion.

Amb·rose was plainly in no mood to let the happenings of tonight roll an obstacle into the path of his progress. Looking into his eyes one confidently might have expected him to break out into violent ar.aignment. Instead his words came smoothly and quietly.

"Joe," he said, "let these night birds go. I've sent Labelle about his business. It's you I want to talk with."

Tony shot a malevolent look at him, then shrugged himself into his wet coat and went out. Frank opened his lips to protest. In a flash Lieutenant Ambrose had him by the shoulder and had flung him out with his companion, slamming and locking the door after him.

Before again addressing Le Brun, Ambrose went stealthily to the one other door of the room, jerking it open swiftly and flashing an electric torch into the gloom beyond. Here was a narrow hallway leading to a rear door of the saloon, also giving access by a dingy flight of stairs to the sleeping quarters upon the second floor. Seeing only emptiness, hearing only the inconsequent laugh of a drunken man in the barroom, Ambrose closed the door and turned to Le Brun.

There was much between the gangster and the police officer, and now, to confuse matters when

both wanted clarity of vision, came distrust. Events had not gone according to schedule tonight; Ambrose's fixed stare into Le Brun's eyes demanded the explanation.

"If you try to double cross me, Joe," he said coolly, "I'll get you."

Joe snarled back at him, his small eyes abnormally salient under his hairless brows.

"Try it," he said boldly. "There'd be aplenty left of my rope to hang you, Ambrose."

"By God . . . " began Ambrose, his eyes hardening until they were less like human eyes than polished stone. Then, breaking off suddenly, his voice cool as when he had first come in from the street, he said, "Let's have this straight, Joe, and save time. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing," answered Le Brun.

"You arranged everything with Labelle. He claims that he did his part and put the money in the safe. Is he lying? Or are you lying? Or has one of your gang shot off his mouth and let some other crook into the know?"

"I've kept my mouth shut and you know it," answered Le Brun. "So have Tony and Frank. As for Labelle . . . " He lifted his fat shoulders. "He's your man, not mine. For all I know you and Labelle may have split it between you."

There were both fury and open menace in Ambrose's look. Le Brun seemed to note neither.

"You're getting bold, you damned toad, you," muttered the officer. "But just as sure as there's such a thing as a law court in this burg I'll set my heel on you if you don't walk straight with me.

Every time I see you I am taking chances. And I'm not the man to take chances for nothing. I'll screw everything out of Labelle he's got in him when I get through with you. And you'll talk now or, curse you, I won't listen when you want to talk tomorrow."

"Well," returned Le Brun heavily, "what do you want?"

"I want to know who cracked that safe tonight!"

"I didn't. Tony and Frank didn't."

"Then who did? If any man knows, you know."

For a brief second Le Brun hesitated. Then, seeing that his hesitation was keenly watched by the other, he spat out:

"It's Ashe's work! Ladyfingers is the man you want, Ambrose. And, by God, he's the man I want!"

"So!" said Ambrose with a grim tightening of the lips. "I thought so! He's getting ambitious, is Ashe! He might be after your job, Joe!"

The words, coming jeeringly, stung a little fresh color into Joe's yellow cheeks.

"He's a young know-it-all that ain't got the sense to keep out of jail," he said viciously. And then, "You got to get somebody for this, Ambrose. If you can't prove it on Ashe, why we'll frame it on him. It'll serve him right for butting in where he ain't invited."

"And the cash?" demanded Ambrose dryly. "After all the chances I've taken in this mess you don't think that I'm coming out of it empty handed, do you?"

"You'll get more'n the rest of us," retorted Le

Brun. "You get your name in big letters in all the city papers as the man that got the dead-wood on Ladyfingers. You get another little boost up. What do I get?"

Ambrose laughed a trifle insultingly.

"You get a man out of your way who's beginning to prove more than you can handle. It's about time when it's you or him, Joe, and not being blind you know it."

Joe's splenetic outburst was checked in its beginning by the policeman's uplifted hand.

"Let me talk," he said sharply. "I've got something else to do besides chat all night with you. It's one of two things: I'm going to get five thousand dollars in my fist inside of twenty-four hours . . . or I'm going to make an arrest. And the man I lay my hand on is going to do time. Get that?"

What thoughts lay back of the round eyes of the gangster did not make themselves manifest. He merely waited.

"If it was Ashe," went on Ambrose, "it's one chance to a hundred if we can prove anything on him. He's the slickest man doing business in this town right now, he's got more brains in those girl's hands of his than you've got in your fat head, and he doesn't leave a trail a mile wide behind him. And I tell you right now that when I put my hand on a man he's going straight to the pen."

Again he paused; again Joe Brun, meeting his eyes steadily, waited.

"I wait twenty-four hours for the five thousand," repeated Ambrose. "After that I make an arrest. The rest is up to you."

"You've talked plain so far," said Le Brun colorlessly. "You might as well talk plain all the way."

"You want it in words of one syllable, do you?" Ambrose's guarded voice lowered a little, he thrust forward his face suddenly so that it was quite close to Joe's. "All right. If you can frame up the deal on Ashe I'll nab him. But it's got to be a clear case and a sure conviction after it, mind you. If you can't frame it on him . . . I'll frame it on you. You told the truth a while ago when you said that Labelle was my man. You're damned right he is, body and soul! Is that plain talk?"

"You would arrest me?" said Joe curiously. "If I don't come across with the five thousand, if I don't tie the tin can to Ashe, you would arrest me?"

"Yes," was the quiet answer.

"You've got nerve, Ambrose," said Le Brun. "Yes, and you've got a pull. But there ain't the man living on the force with nerve and pull enough to put the bracelets on Joe Le Brun. And you can't bluff me, either. I know too much."

Lieutenant Ambrose found a fat cigar in an inner pocket, lighted it, buttoned his overcoat closely about his throat.

"Good night, Joe," he said, going to the door. "Twenty-four hours, remember."

Le Brun had had intimate dealings with Ambrose for four years. In all of that time he had never known the officer to say a thing which he did not mean. He knew that one of the man's axioms upon which his success was founded was: "Never bet until you've got the cards in your hands." He had

accused Ambrose of bluffing; in his heart he knew better. In a flash he reviewed in mind all that he knew to Ambrose's discredit; all that he was in a position to prove in a law court. As the quick result of his thoughts came the decision that now was no time for an open break.

"Wait a minute, Ambrose," he said bluntly. "It's better for both of us to work together than to start something. It would cost us both a lot of money and what good would it do?"

Ambrose, sensing that he held the whip hand, had no intention of waiting. But at that moment the door leading into the narrow hallway opened softly, and as he saw who it was entering, he came back into the room, quick, changing lights leaping into his eyes, the lights of covetousness.

It was a girl whose exquisite form was more than half guessed through the faded, torn wrapper she had drawn about her, a girl with dark, passionate face and vivid lips. She looked at the two men sleepily from under her tumbled hair.

"Polly!" snapped Le Brun savagely. "What are you doing here?"

She yawned in his face, stretching arms so that the big sleeves fell away from ir round whiteness.

"I had a dago dinner at Coppa's last night," said Polly. "And now, talk about a thirst! What are you prowling around in that rig for?"

She looked at her father's nightdress and giggled.

"Go to bed," said Le Brun angrily. "Can't you see we're busy? Ain't there any water upstairs?"

"Water!" sniffed Polly. "Who said water? I

want a lemonade. With ice in it; lots of ice. Have a drink, Dick?" she offered, whirling about upon Ambrose.

"Dinner at Coppa's?" said Ambrose. "I told you I'd take you to a better place than that any time you wanted to go. . . . Who'd you go with?"

She blew him a saucy kiss from her finger tips and wrinkled her nose at him.

"Jealous, Dick?" she laughed. "Gee, you just love me to death, don't you? Well, if you want to know, I went with the swellest boy you ever saw."

"Ashe?" cried Le Brun, his hand on her shoulder. "You didn't go with Ashe?"

She slipped out of his grasp and looked up at him impudently.

"Didn't I?" she said lightly, although with a ring of triumph in her voice. "And he ain't just dippy over me, is he? Oh, no!"

Le Brun's frown met a look of quick suspicion in Ambrose's eyes. The girl, mindful of her thirst, however, said a bit petulantly:

"Send in the lemonade, papa. And something for Mr. Ambrose. And, say," as she treated him to a measuring stare, "either go back to bed or get some clothes on. You make me blush; honest to God you do."

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGER'S OFFER

LE BRUN'S irritation at the interruption subsided quickly. He was not sorry that Polly had diverted the police lieutenant's thoughts to a side issue. A keen look now at the girl whom he supposed he could read like a book for the simple fact that she was his own daughter, satisfied him that it was mere chance and her thirst engendered by a spicy dinner that had brought her downstairs at this hour. A second look, no less penetrating, directed toward Ambrose, and Joe Le Brun withdrew to call an order to the bartender and then to go upstairs and dress. If Ambrose meant to stand pat upon his ultimatum it was just as well not to waste any single one of the twenty-four hours.

When the drinks came, a long glass of lemonade, a whisky bottle and glass, Polly received them through the half opened door, thus giving the man who brought them no glimpse of her companion. Ambrose had moved to one side to be out of sight should the bartender look in. He latched the door while Polly was setting the tray upon the table.

Over the rim of her glass as she dra . Polly laughed at him with her eyes. She even lowered one eyelid at him knowingly, still drinking thirstily.

At last with a deep, audible breath of satisfaction she placed her glass, empty, on the table.

"Gee, that's some drink when you're on fire inside," she confided in him, her red lips shining and moist through the sheen of liquid adhering to them. "I know just how a dray horse feels in summer when he gets his head in a bucket of water."

Ambrose's eyes, measuring her a bit coarsely from the head of tumbled, black hair to the pink and white of her feet in their shoddy slippers, were alive with admiration. As he was about to speak she checked him by saying banteringly:

"Say, you're the suspicious gink, ain't you? You're sure the gum shoe artist for fair! What are you locking dad out for? Ain't you remembering he's my chaperone?"

"I'll open the door when he comes back," said Ambrose seriously. "But I don't mind a word with you first, Polly."

"Shoot," she told him without taking the chair he shoved out at her. "I'm about due to go back and get my beauty sleep."

"Talking about chaperones," he began, "did you have one along tonight? At Coppa's?"

"*Oh, la, la!*" she laughed at him quite as La Petite Delorme had laughed earlier in the night at her Orpheum audience. She sat upon an edge of the table, caught up a round knee between her clasped hands, and stared at him impudently. "They haven't made a probation officer out of you, have they?"

The night had not been the sort to put Ambrose into a mood of jest and nonsense. He frowned

under the laughter in her mocking eyes and said harshly,

"Are you letting this fellow Ashe make a fool out of you?"

Polly lifted her black brows at him.

"You've got the wrong number," she told him stiffly. "My name is Polly Le Brun."

"Then what are you running around with him for?" asked Ambrose. "He's a damned crook, and you know it. What's more he hasn't the stand-in and he hasn't the brains to get across with the sort of thing he's trying to pull off. Take a tip and drop him, Polly. I'm going to get him."

Polly's eyes hardened, and a little sneer touched her lips fleetingly.

"So he's a crook, is he?" She laughed amusedly. "That's real news to me, Dickie! But say," and a subtle change crept into her voice, a vague softening that yet held something of defiance, "he's one thing you couldn't hang a name on so easy, not knowing as much about that sort of thing as you know about crooks. No, I don't need chaperones when I go places with Ashe. He's a gentleman, Lieutenant Ambrose."

"You little fool," muttered Ambrose. "You little fool."

"I heard you the first time," said Polly, lightly. But for all her attitude and steady eye, a faint flush warmed her dusky skin.

Ambrose fell to plucking at his lower lip with big thumb and forefinger, his gaze deeply thoughtful. Polly watched him, swinging her foot back and forth, an upward curve at each corner of her mouth.

But in spite of her she started at Ambrose's next quiet words.

"How'd you like to go to jail, Polly?"

"Jail?" She looked at him wonderingly. Then she lifted her shoulders and laughed again. "You can't come a blazer like that on me, Ambrose. I'm nobody's incubator baby."

"You see," went on the officer quite impersonally, quite as though he were merely thinking aloud, "it's just a trifle odd that your thirst . . . Wait a minute."

He stepped across the room to the wall telephone while the girl watched him curiously. He gave a number, got it promptly, asked for Martinelli.

"Ambrose speaking," he announced into the transmitter. "Did young Ashe . . . Ladyfingers, you know . . . dine at your place tonight? With a girl? . . . Well, damn it, find out. . . . Hello. How's that? . . . You are sure he was not there? . . . That's all."

He came back to Polly and continued in the same thoughtful strain:

"It's a little odd that your thirst should bring you downstairs just when it did. It's a little odd that about the first thing you said was an alibi for Ashe. It's funny, Polly, that Labelle's safe should have been plundered tonight. I don't believe over much in coincidences."

"Go on," said Polly. "You said something."

"You didn't know, I suppose, that Labelle's safe *had* been cracked?"

"Was it?" said Polly innocently. "Ain't it a shame!"

"What's more, your swell friend, Ashe, did the job."

"Gee!" No matter what her thoughts, Polly's eyes were dancing as she leaned forward. "No more Dago-red and fake jewels for Polly! It'll be bubbles and real cut glass! Will you excuse me a minute, Dick, while I call up my dressmaker?"

She slipped down from the table, ran to the telephone and called her number. Ambrose, close at her side now, watched her suspiciously.

"Say," Polly was saying gaily. "Congratulations! And I forgot to thank you for that swell feed we had tonight at Coppa's, in the little room, you know . . ."

Ambrose's hand snatched the receiver from her. "None of that!" he commanded sternly. He wrenched her forcibly from the instrument.

Polly returned to her seat on the table and managed to coax half a dozen drops from the bottom of her lemonade glass. Ambrose's eyes, as he followed her, were full of fire.

"I'm going to get Ladyfingers inside twenty-four hours," he told her bluntly. "You are free to tell him, if you like. It won't make any difference. And when I get him he'll be glad if the judge lets him off with ten years! As for you . . ."

"You stop like a story in a magazine!" Polly informed him in simulated breathlessness. "What's the next chapter?"

"You little devil!" With a sudden quick movement he grasped her two wrists, holding them hard, his face close to hers. "You will be glad to do what I tell you to do. Understand? Understand?

"You'd play fast and loose with me, would you?"

You'd play fast and loose with me, would you? By God, I'll frame you for an accomplice if you drive me to it."

She understood well enough. Her eyes grew hard, but there came no look of fear into them.

"When you get through with my hands," she said coolly, "let me know, will you? I want to scratch my nose."

Ambrose, drawing the girl fiercely toward him, dropped her hands suddenly as there came a discreet knock at the hall door.

"A man wants to see Joe right away." It was the soft voice of the night bartender. "He says it's important . . . that there's money in it."

"Papa's upstairs," cried Polly swiftly.

"Who is he?" demanded Ambrose.

But at this juncture Joe Le Brun's heavy tread was heard on the stairs, Joe's oily voice demanding the same thing. In a moment the gangster, hastily but fully dressed even to the brown derby hat set far back upon his glistening forehead, came in.

"I don't know what's up," he said quickly. "A guy out there wants to see me in private. He knows you're here, too. I think he's got something on Ladyfingers. . . ."

A sharp look from Ambrose checked him. He swung upon Polly, of whose presence he had until now taken no note.

"*Good* night!" said Polly, seeing what was coming. "I'm off to bed again." And from the door, in arch pretense of a demure shyness which it was nothing short of wonderful that she could even com-

prehend, her eyes downcast, she murmured, "You may ask my papa's consent, Mr. Ambrose . . . Dick!"

With a giggle she was gone.

"Damn the girl!" grunted Le Brun. "What's she driving at?"

But Ambrose, single purposed again, did not seek to answer.

"Who is this man, Joe?" he asked almost u ly. "How does he know I'm here?"

"Don't know. I told the barkeeper to send him along in. I'll find out. If you don't want to stay . . ."

"Oh, I'll stay. If any trouble grows out of tonight," he added with slow significance, "it won't be hard for me to give a reason for looking you up. Only mind you call me Lieutenant Ambrose while he is here. Don't get too damned familiar."

The man who came in was subjected to a sharp scrutiny which was evidently not overpleasant to him. He drew his already low-drawn hat lower over his eyes. There was a black silk muffler about his throat, his hands were gloved, there was little enough of him to be seen. But that portion of his face which was visible was strongly individual. The nose was large, the bridge unusually thin, the nostrils narrow. The mouth was wide, with square teeth oddly conspicuous when he was speaking, the lips thin and pale.

"You are Le Brun? And you, Lieutenant Ambrose?" he asked hurriedly, manner and voice alike nervous. "I know you are. I . . . I want to talk with you, both of you. About a man named

Ashe, called Ladyfingers, I believe. A . . . a thief, a pickpocket, God knows what . . ."

A disgusted sneer touched Ambrose's lips. The lieutenant had an inherent contempt for the inefficient. At the jump he set this man down as a weakling.

The newcomer had broken off abruptly, his eyes running back and forth between Ambrose and Le Brun. Neither of his listeners made any reply to his rapid words as both waited for him to go on.

"I know something about this man Ashe," he continued, his voice hardly more than a whisper, his air more ill at ease than before. "I . . . I know something of you, too, Mr. Le Brun. And," a little uncertainly, though he sought to put a deal of sudden bluster into the words, "of you, Lieutenant Ambrose. I have made it my business to know all there was to be found out about all of you."

Joe frowned. Ambrose laughed.

"We can talk plainly, can't we?" the strange visitor ran on. "Mr. Le Brun here doesn't love Ashe any too much, does he? Neither does Lieutenant Ambrose. Both have their reasons. Both are not averse to . . . to seeing the said Ashe put in a position where he shall suffer the just penalty for his misdeeds. Am I right?"

"If you ain't crazy let's see you prove it," grunted Joe. "What are you driving at?"

The newcomer, seeming on the verge of speaking, closed his thin lips, ran the tip of his tongue back and forth between them, then stepped to the table and poured out a small glass of whisky. His nervousness had grown so that now his hands were shaking.

Ambrose went to the nall door and looked out. He had formed his own opinion of the stranger and retained his suspicions of Polly.

"That's right," their visitor said. "We want no witnesses. There is no need for a long discussion of the *status quo*. It is enough to repeat that Ashe is a criminal and that you don't harbor any friendly feelings for him."

He drank his whisky hastily and wiped his lips with a clean, white handkerchief; Ambrose, with shrewd, keen eyes, noted that the bit of cloth was of fine texture and a trifle dainty for a man's. He judged, too, from a little fleck of color in the cheeks and a slight alteration in the voice, that the man was not given to alcohol.

Ambrose, a little theory already forming in his brain concerning this man, looked down at his shoes. They were fairly new, but they were not "in style" and they had not been shined for several days. They were comfortable looking, strong, square toed.

"Timid sort of guy," he meditated swiftly. "*Status quo* is Latin. Wears good clothes, but doesn't think of getting his shoes shined or his pants pressed He ain't a city man; country preacher or a country lawyer. . . . I think you want to make us some sort of a proposition," he prompted. "Let's have it if you mean business."

"Yes, yes," eagerly, "let's get it over with. I don't want to ask any questions and I won't answer any. I . . ."

In spite of him he hesitated, seeming to find it next to impossible to get the thing out. He drew his hat lower, he brought up his muffler higher.

The Stranger's Offer

"Ashe is a criminal," he announced at last. "He deserves no consideration. He is a menace to society. The hour he is arrested . . . mind you with sufficient evidence against him and on a charge to send him to the penitentiary for not less than ten years . . . you can come to me for five thousand dollars."

CHAPTER III

LADYFINGERS

THE story of the robbery "broke" too late for the morning papers; but the extras got it and made much of it. The newsboys made a lively din with their announcements:

"*Mysterious burglary south of Market! Extra!*"

Mr. Hamilton Hamilton of Woodward, Haynes and Hamilton of New York was in the West on business for his firm, one of international note as the manufacturers of the W. H. & H. Fire Proof, Burglar Proof Safes. Mr. Hamilton, going down to breakfast as usual, at nine o'clock, found on his table all of the morning papers and all of the extras. He gave his attention to the sugaring of his grapefruit; then he glanced at the news. Thereafter he ate abstractedly and ten minutes later, with the paper still in his hand, he hurried down to his offices. At ten o'clock his wide-awake press agent, Ripley Rush, was with him and had taken his orders, nodding in approval.

"Keep the story alive," commanded Hamilton. "There'll be new stuff on this thing for the evening papers. We want it on the front pages. We want it on the front pages again in the morning. It's got the juice in it to go big if somebody gets behind it. Buy some drinks, Rip, and spend some money."

"I'm on," answered Rush, reaching for his hat. "You're going to speed up our demonstration?"

Hamilton nodded toward his typist, whose machine was clicking like mad.

"Placards are out already," he said. "More are going out as fast as they come off the presses. Letters are on their way and more are coming. I've got fifty kids on the streets with dodgers and you can dig up fifty mo e. We give the demonstration right away; there's . dray carting a safe to Mandel's new department store on Market. We've leased the building for three days. Now . . . get busy! We're about due to sell safes faster than the old folks at home can turn 'em out."

"Right-o!" said Ripley Rush. And he did not wait for the somnolent elevator boy.

This was by no means the beginning of a publicity campaign; just the smashing crescendo for the finale. Hamilton had planned his demonstration for Saturday, a week from today. But he was no less wide awake than his press agent and knew that fruit must be plucked when it was ripe, not by calendar.

He arrived at Mandel's empty department store in time to superintend personally the placement of the big safe. On his way he saw everywhere boys distributing his handbills. He noted how quickly a crowd of the curious was collecting about the store. He heard his high salaried "barker" shouting:

"Read in the papers *what* they did to a safe last night; come inside and see *how* they did it. It's free!"

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Hamilton?"

A young man had slipped through the crowd and was standing at his side, smiling pleasantly. Hamilton stared at the unfamiliar face, and turned away, saying crisply,

"Can't you see that I am busy? Hey, you!" shouting his orders again, "I don't want it down there. Get it up on that platform. I don't care if it is heavy. Get it up there."

He shouldered his way forward; the young man kept close to him. When Hamilton grew silent, watching the carrying out of his orders, he was reminded of the other's presence.

"May I have that word now, Mr. Hamilton?"

The voice was decidedly pleasant; the smile which Hamilton whirled about to see, was the same pleasant smile.

"Well?" demanded the steel safe man. "What do you want?"

"That's simple," laughed the other. His words, very distinct, were clearly meant for Hamilton's ears alone. "I want to save you five thousand dollars, if you don't mind. And I'd like to make a like sum for myself."

Hamilton, the most matter-of-fact man to be found in a day's search, stared at him wonderingly. The young man met his gaze frankly, his lips twitching as with amusement.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Hamilton.

A neatly engraved card, eminently proper as to style and form, was presented by a neatly gloved hand. The card read, "*Robert Ashe, Expert.*"

"Expert?" Hamilton lifted his brows, a first

gleam of interest quickening his glance. "What sort of expert?"

"All sorts," laughed Mr. Ashe genially. "Let us say expert on Life, Lyric Poetry and . . . Burglar Proof Safes!"

"Damn it," snapped Hamilton, turning away, "I haven't any time for foolery."

But evidently Mr. Ashe was neither to be dismissed nor disgruntled this morning. Still at Hamilton's side he put forth a detaining hand while with another he held out a bank note.

"It's a hundred dollars," he said carelessly. "Not much, but maybe it would pay even a busy man like you for half an hour of his time . . . in case my proposition fails to interest you."

With men like Hamilton "money talks." The bill in his own hand he regarded Robert Ashe keenly and with growing interest. After all the big safe was properly placed, the other safes could be entrusted to Harley and Rush. So after a few more words he and Mr. Ashe stepped into Hamilton's car and drove back to the offices.

The distinctive thing about this young man, Hamilton told himself as they sped down Market Street, was that he wore gloves at this time of day. You might go a dozen times up and down San Francisco's main thoroughfare and not chance upon another gloved man. In the private office, however, fronting each other, he saw that there were many distinctive things about this well-groomed, handsome young fellow.

He had said something idiotic about poetry. "Damn it," thought Hamilton, "that's what he is.

A crazy poet!" For, so far as Hamilton Hamilton was concerned, poetry was pretty closely synonymous with slush, drivel, and a vast mental vacuity.

The large eyes, soft for a man's and luminous, were those of a dreamer of dreams; the tender mouth, the eager face alight with the gleam of joyous youth, were those of a poet. As immaculate as a fashion plate, as suave as a politician, as handsome as a Shelley, as proud as Lucifer . . . such an anomaly was Robert Ashe, Expert upon Life, Lyric Poetry and Burglar Proof Safes.

With a quiet, "If you don't mind?" Ashe took the telephone from Hamilton's desk. Into it he said a pleasant, "Good morning." And then, "It's a shame to disturb you so early since you didn't get much sleep last night. But if you'd care to call at the offices of Woodward, Haynes, and Hamilton, you might be interested in a little private demonstration of their latest burglar proof safe. Yes; this is Ashe."

"If *you* don't mind," said Hamilton irritably, "we'll get down to business."

"This is one of your new safes?" Ashe stepped across the room to it, stooping to read the legend upon the heavy door. "Just like the one at Mandel's, only smaller?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"If you'll put that hundred dollar bill in it," returned Ashe, "the one I loaned you, I'll take it out!"

"You will, will you?" grunted Hamilton. And then, a bit suspiciously, "Who was that you just called up?"

One of the young fellow's rarely contagious smiles filled his eyes with shining merriment.

"Oh, he's a very particular friend of mine. Police Lieutenant Ambrose. He rooms only a couple of blocks from here, and if I'm not mistaken he will be with us almost before you have got the bill in the safe, the door shut, and I've got my gloves off. A very enthusiastic sort of man is Lieutenant Ambrose."

"What do you want him here for?"

"My dear Mr. Hamilton, to give an exact reason for the many complex emotions commonly actuating us in the performance of even a very ordinary sort of act is generally absolutely impossible. I am not keen on analysis, anyhow. I'd say I asked him to come so that he might in a way introduce us and . . . just for fun."

Preëminently was Mr. Hamilton Hamilton a business man, sober-minded, matter of fact. His visitor had made a statement which Hamilton was of no mind to accept without proof. If the thing were true it might mean a tremendous business tragedy. Hamilton would make it his affair to learn if this young man were bluffing.

The hundred dollar bank note was still in his hand. He swung the safe door open, dropped the note inside, busied himself a moment with the combination, sheltering the mechanism with his body from any look Ashe might direct toward it, and softly closed the door.

"There you are," he said, as he got to his feet. "Go ahead."

"If you can spare a moment," asked Ashe, "do you mind waiting for the lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Ambrose came within something less than five minutes. Hearing a knock at the outer office door Ashe said coolly.

"If you'll welcome him, Mr. Hamilton, perhaps he can satisfy any curiosity you may have concerning me."

Ambrose was in uniform. Hamilton, going to him, said sharply:

"There's a man named Ashe here. He claims he can open one of our safes. It's nonsense of course but . . . What do you know about him? Who is he?"

Ambrose took no care to lower his voice as he answered. Ashe laughed as the words came to him.

"He's a damned crook!" exploded the officer. "There's not a worse in the country. He's a man with a new name for every new lay; but whether he calls himself Robert Ashe or Charles Elliott or Jimmie Free, he's always Ladyfingers, . . . just plain crook! And, on top of that, he's a hare-brained young fool who is trying to show off now, and who's going to find himself in a peck of trouble before he's much older."

He pushed by Hamilton and burst into the private office.

"What are you up to now?" he asked harshly. "What are you doing here? After last night . . . God! The nerve of you!"

"You see," laughed Ashe into Hamilton's puzzled face, "I'll bet you a hat he thinks I am the man who cracked that safe last night! What I am doing here," he added pleasantly, "is giving

Mr. Hamilton a little private demonstration of his own safe. I thought that you, being interested in such matters from your own point of view, might care to be on hand."

Speaking, he slipped off his gloves. Now, it is not for a business man like Mr. Hamilton Hamilton to notice particularly the beautiful things in the world, even when they are set under his nose. Certainly his practical mind had never pondered upon such a matter as beautiful hands. He had never in the years of his life noted anything which called for a second look in the most carefully kept pair of hands of the most delicately fastidious lady whom he knew. But as Ashe's gloves came away Hamilton Hamilton stared and wondered and admired.

Once Joe Le Brun had epitomized all that there was to be said about Ashe's hands when he had growled,

"The damned things are alive! He can see with them, he can hear with them, and curse me if I don't believe he can smell with his little fingers!"

"Mr. Hamilton, as a part of his publicity campaign, is offering a reward," Ashe was saying as he knelt by the safe door, "to any man who can burglarize his safe down at Mandel's. He guarantees to give the man a free hand and no end of time and all the tools he can name. And he'll put ten thousand dollars in gold in the safe to be taken out by the man who can open it. Am I not right, Mr. Hamilton?"

"You are," said Hamilton emphatically.

"Mr. Hamilton is looking for publicity," smiled Ashe. One hand touched the little knob control-

ling the combination; the other was laid lightly, with slightly spread fingers, against the door itself, quite close to the knob. "I am not! In a minute, when you have gone, Lieutenant Ambrose, Mr. Hamilton and I are going to talk business. We won't keep you for that part of it."

Both Ambrose and Hamilton came closer to watch him. Upon Hamilton's brows was the first sign of anxiety, a little troubled frown darkening his eyes. He was sure of his safe; this was all tomfoolery. And yet Ashe's air of quiet assurance was oddly disquieting.

The young man leaned a little closer to the safe, turning the small knob swiftly, the expression in his eyes that of a man who listens intently. He smiled, placed his left hand a trifle closer to the right, and leaned back again, his eyes lifted pleasantly to Hamilton's perplexed ones.

Ambrose, seeking to watch the better, moved a little. Ashe frowned at him angrily.

"I can't work unless I have quiet," he said sharply. "Keep still."

Ambrose glared at him but, out of a curiosity scarcely less than Hamilton's, grew rigidly still. Ashe's right hand spun and spun the shining knob; his left crept the fraction of an inch closer, crept back, only the tips of the slender, white, sensitive fingers touching the steel surface now.

"Look at your watch," he commanded, his eyes still upon Hamilton's. "Give me ten seconds."

In the intense stillness the ticking of the watch was audible throughout the room. Hamilton, more agitated in spite of the coolness of the reason he

called upon than he had been at very grave moments in his financial life, counted the seconds. One, two, three, four, five . . . and Ashe, laughing softly, was on his feet, the heavy door swinging open!

"My God!" cried Hamilton. "I am ruined!"

Ashe's laugh was like the laugh of a boy delighted with the outcome of a successful prank. In it was neither viciousness nor threat; nothing but the sincerest merriment. With a bit of chamois skin, whipped from his pocket, he swiftly and thoroughly obliterated all finger prints from the safe's polished surface.

"Force of habit!" he explained lightly. "Safety first."

He withdrew the hundred dollar bill and slipped it into his vest pocket, along with the chamois.

"Not ruined, Mr. Hamilton," he said in that pleasantly boyish voice of his. He drew on his gloves while Hamilton and Ambrose stared at him. "You've put a fortune into the thing, I suppose? Well, you've got one of the best safes on the market. To be sure it's no great trick to open it . . . if one knows how! But then, besides myself, there is probably not another man living who does know how! And, after all, I am no blood-sucker."

"You're a crook," said Ambrose bluntly. "And this little funny business you've pulled off this morning will help send you to the pen."

Ashe sighed.

"You haven't as much imagination as a cow or as much romance as a street car," he said sorrowfully. "You'll never get anywhere, Ambrose. Not even as a cop."

"But," Hamilton was saying excitedly, "the thing is impossible! I saw it done but . . . but there's a trick, somewhere. It's a physical impossibility."

"So was wireless telegraphy," Ashe assured him lightly, "until the right man made of it a physical possibility. There's an old, grey-headed yarn about a man named Columbus and an egg. Read it."

Hamilton snatched up his telephone, got his press agent on the line, and ordered him peremptorily to break all records getting back to the office.

"Mr. Hamilton," said Ambrose suddenly, "let me have a word with you. Alone." he added meaningly.

"Pardon me just a second f[illegible]. Laughed Ashe good-naturedly. "I want you t[illegible]w, Mr. Hamilton, that this is no frame-up. I am not working any game with Lieutenant Ambrose. If he makes you any proposition, remember that I am not in on it. I am absolutely a free lance."

"What sort of a proposition?" asked Hamilton.

"Let us say," grinned the young fellow, "that he takes you into the next room and assures you that if you will make it worth while to him he'll arrest me on the spot and guarantee to send me up for a good long time and so get me out of the way of doing you any harm. That's what he's got in his eye. Only don't let him fool you; if he had anything on me that he could prove he would have sprung it long ago."

A little spot of color came into the detective's cheek under the boy's quick words. But none the less he and Hamilton went into the outer room, closed

the door after them, and remained in low-toned conversation until Ripley Rush came hurrying in. Then Ambrose went his way and Hamilton and Rush entered the private office.

"What is your proposition, Mr. Ashe," Hamilton asked him. He had regained his cool manner and looked with hard, purposeful eyes upon Ashe.

"I made it down at Mandel's," returned Ashe. "You offer ten thousand dollars to any man who in public opens your safe. I do the job in private, you give me five thousand and save five thousand. And I undertake to guarantee that no man will be forthcoming to humiliate you in public. Is it a go?"

Ripley Rush, nervously excited, dragged Hamilton aside and whispered eagerly. In a moment Hamilton turned toward Ashe, saying,

"Mr. Ashe, I imagine from what your friend Lieutenant Ambrose had to tell me, that I can make it extremely unpleasant for you. But criminal investigation is not my business. My business is getting publicity for my safe and making sales. I am willing to take you at your word as a . . . ah . . . sort of general expert. Can you open any safe as easily as you did this?"

"I should be glad," returned the young fellow with a twinkle in his eyes, "to give you my signed testimonial that your safe is absolutely the best, the hardest to crack, on the market."

"Then, by thunder," cried Hamilton, his press agent's enthusiasm and excitement gripping him, "I'll make *you* a proposition! You go on our demonstration stands, you open every damned safe

they trot out to you, you balk alone at ours . . . and I'll pay you a salary that will make a bank president's income look sick! And, to boot, I'll fight any case that Ambrose brings up against you. I guess you're a crook; I know he is!"

"Thank you. I'll live like a king on my little five thousand," laughed Ashe. "Until it is gone. Then there's lots more to be had. But go to work for any man living . . ." He shook his head. Then a swift change coming into his eyes he spoke very seriously. "Do you know I've got only one thing in the world that's worth living for? Most people seem to miss it somehow. It is my absolute personal freedom. I do as I like, I go where I like, and by Heaven, I am free! Thank you, Mr. Hamilton. But I am not looking for a job this morning."

"By gad, I'll buy a lunch for you," said the enthusiastic Ripley Rush. "With all the trimmings! Any time!"

"But this five thousand . . . blackmail . . .," grumbled Hamilton.

"Give it to him," said Rush. "It won't bust you. And it strikes me he's earned it."

CHAPTER IV

HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT

WE flatter ourselves that we know ourselves rather well. On top of that we are pretty unanimous in considering ourselves extremely estimable individuals. From which it is amply clear that either the world is populated by a race entirely excellent or that, after all, we don't know as much about ourselves as we think we do.

Robert Ashe knew as much of himself, in a way, as most people. Perhaps more, since he was much given to thoughtful moods, and was at times keenly introspective, always observant. There follows an epitome of Robert Ashe's knowledge and understanding of Robert Ashe:

He had been born in San Francisco, in the district known opprobriously as South of Market, a shade more than twenty years ago. His father had died perhaps a couple of years after little Robert's birth. His mother, a frail, pretty woman whom the boy remembered rather as a weary, heartsick angel than as resembling any other woman he had ever known, died when he was just planning upon the great adventure of a first day at school. She had told him stories about Tom Thumb, Cinderella,

Santa Claus, and God. She had taken him a few times to a free reading room and, hushing his ecstasy to gasps and whispers, had shown him very wonderful pictures. Then one day never to be forgotten, the little boy watched a peculiar, grandly beautiful carriage drive from the door with two men in black upon the seat, and had stared after them through the pelting rain wonderingly, his thoughts filled with stories of fairy godmothers and royal equipages made magically from pumpkins.

He had run into the house to tell his mamma. The hard-working, hardship-hardened Italian woman with whom he and Mrs. Ashe had long lodged was a little nervous and quite a little drunk. She had laughed at the boy's wonder tale, had cuffed one of her own litter for getting under her feet, and had told Robert that his mother was dead. He knew what the word meant. He had once found a sparrow, cold and wet in the gutter, and had come running in with it for mamma to warm it and make it wake up. The sparrow had never awakened. Now his mamma was like that. The single word, "Dead," clung with him long afterward, heavy and oppressive upon him like a black, breathless night.

The Italian woman had accepted him as she accepted whatever came into her stolid life, quite as a matter of fact. His mother had perhaps left Robert behind her in lieu of the last couple of months' rent. He was put to work selling newspapers at the ferry upon the day school was opening for other boys and girls. This was to be his school. The bright five-cent pieces he carried home with him

were the first bright things in his life after the death of his mother.

In spite of the wretched cards put into his baby fingers for the beginning of the game of life he was a bright eyed, bright hearted, normal boy. Though he knew nothing of such things there were two strong contending factors eternally at his elbow directing each play. There was Heredity, backed by six years of training by a cultured woman; there was Environment. The two in their compromise came in time to make the Robert Ashe who deftly opened Hamilton Hamilton's safe.

Heredity gave him, to begin with, a fine, handsome body and a sound brain. Environment trained the two of them. Each had its part in the development of an unusually keen memory.

He never forgot the wonder tales of Tom Thumb, Cinderella, Santa Claus, and God. He never lost entirely certain more or less vague ideals which had been instilled in him while too young to more than grope after the significance of such abstractions as truth, honor, and righteousness. He knew, for his mother had told him, that he was a little gentleman; that some day, if he ate his mush and drank his milk and behaved properly, he would be a big gentleman. And gentlemen were like the princes in the fairy books at the free reading room.

Because physically he was pleasant to look upon, despite torn clothes and dirty face, and because it was in his blood to be as merry as a lark, he made many friends. Among his intimate circle of acquaintances was an Englishman who was the saddest man Robert ever knew, and who had an influence

greater than either of them realized upon the shaping of the boy's life. The Englishman was more often drunk than not; in his soberer moments he gained a wretched livelihood by doing odd jobs along the water front, acting as porter to the crowd of an incoming steamer, sweeping barrooms, running errands for a dime or peeling potatoes for a meal. But to the boy's imaginative eyes the seedy, disreputable man moved through a sort of rosy mist. For the derelict had confessed that, once upon a time, he had been a gentleman.

Evidently he had a genuine liking for the boy. From a vast knowledge gained from a lifetime of failure, he had preached little sermons to which Robert listened gravely. These points the boy carried away with him from the talks held on a pier down at China Basin: 1. A man, even a gentleman, would lose his grip on life if he indulged too freely in alcohol or drugs. 2. Generally speaking, the world was divided into two classes of people, the educated and the illiterate. 3. It was the fate of the illiterate to work for the educated and to be poorly paid for their services. 4. Some people were by blood-right inherently superior to other people. Such a person was Robert Ashe, such had the Englishman been until he had thrown away his birthright. 5. Whatever there was desirable in the world belonged to that man who could take it for himself.

That night the youngster, some nine years old, presented himself at a night school. He learned readily; his alert mind and merry soul endeared him to the teacher who had to contend with so much

dulness and viciousness; a natural eagerness and perseverance, abetted by the encouragement of the teacher, brought results. He learned to read, he renewed acquaintance with Tom Thumb, Cinderella, and Santa Claus; he found new adventures at sea, on land, and under the earth in the Arabian Nights; he read his own papers.

It was a twisted sort of education at the best, and always was the street his real school in the true sense of the word. He spoke much Italian and some German because of practical, daily need. It was long before he understood that there was a difference between history and fairy tales. The Norman Conquest was quite as interesting as were the Labors of Hercules in the big book without covers by Bulfinch. When he did make the distinction it did not trouble him as he failed to see its significance to him. In speaking he chose his words rather carefully, because his triumvirate of mother, drunken Englishman, and night school teacher had told him that gentlemen were to be known by their manner of speech as well as by other externals. He memorized phrases from his books and talked as much as was possible like Robinson Crusoe and Ivanhoe.

He committed his first theft a little after his mother died. What he had seen other boys do he did. He stole a banana from the corner fruit vendor. In the flurry of his haste he scampered off with a green one. His companions jeered at him and he felt ashamed that he had not done better. But he learned a lesson from his experience: It was to set your eye, from afar, upon the banana you meant to take, to make your selection care-

fully while the banana man thought you were playing marbles, and when you took it not to grab wildly but to take the best of the lot.

He learned another lesson when he saw a boy tricked by the banana man's seeming unwatchfulness. This boy got his face slapped very hard and he did not get his fruit. He learned yet another lesson, one whose moral remained with him always, when he saw the trick done by a taller boy with wolf eyes. This boy came up to the banana man frankly, stood talking with him a little, and swiftly, under the man's very eyes, abstracted the finest banana of the lot. He was a genius and later became a person of some little note as a pickpocket. Little Robert admired him, patterned after him, came to excel him.

Living in an atmosphere of ugliness he came early to experience a love for the beautiful, a thing by no means unusual; a child of the Bowery will snatch hungrily at a bouquet of American Beauties. A picture in an art shop window, a musical bit of verse, a violin solo heard at the Orpheum, these stirred something in him which he did not understand. They sent little shivers through him. He realized that men and women had done these things, had created them, had fashioned from something within themselves a haunting air, a musical line, a dream in soft colors. Plainly, some men were meant to drive brewery wagons; some were meant to be artists. From the first the boy had little sympathy for the brewer's man.

So it was that his soul, too, like his mind, had been touched, a little fire kindled in it. What there was

in him of dreamer and poet not even San Francisco's sordid streets could strangle utterly. But the streets did other things thoroughly. They gave him his theory of life, his philosophy of human existence. Truly, save for certain minor conventions, he grew up as naturally as a wild man in a primitive age. Any differences between the two were slight and superficial, almost negligible. Among the uncivilized it is the man who is the most powerful physically, the most able wielder of a club, who rises to tribal eminence. Here, the successful man was he who had the keenest mind, the coolest nerve, the most capable fingers. Considerations other than expediency were in both cases lacking. No moral sense, no ethical fetters, restricted the free exercise of the will.

To Robbie Ashe, young, fastidious, merry-souled, with an ear for music and a taste for literature and art, life was a free-for-all game well worth the player's utmost skill. To such as were the men and women among whom he spent his earlier years, the city is no other than a great jungle, its denizens the animals God made them in the beginning, their supreme cares sprung from the need of food and shelter. In young Ashe's philosophy the men who had risen above their fellows had merely used their superior strength or cunning to get the things they wanted; these things were rightfully theirs just so long as they were strong enough or cunning enough to hold them; they were Robert Ashe's just as soon as he could get them into his hands.

He gave the matter much thought. He came to look upon the workman who carried his dinner pail

to the factory, and who brought home his meager pay envelope as not so much honest as stupid and absurd. This man had physical strength, but was mentally weak; he was but a tool and a fool, making money for the other fellow. Ashe did not believe in manual labor any more than did San Francisco's men of money. The men of money used their brains; so did young Ashe. The capitalist took his wealth from the world at large; Ashe took what he needed or desired from the capitalist. It was with a sense of humorous satisfaction with Ashe that the capitalist was working for him just as the dinner pail man was working for the capitalist. Hamilton Hamilton had amassed much money making burglar proof safes; he passed some of that money on to Robert Ashe. He, with many of his kind, was a member of Ashe's staff.

His reading of history, of the newspapers of life in the making, emphasized to the boy one thing: Might is right. There is no other. William conquered England. Alexander the world, the barons bested John, the barbarians broke the Romans, all for the same reason that a certain powerful trust was smashing competing concerns here on the Coast because of strength and ability.

So he grew to be what he was, looking at life as he did, quite naturally, quite merrily. He trained his mind and his body as indefatigably as a knight of old trained himself for riding and spear-breaking. He lived life filled with zest; he took his chances with steady nerve, keen eye, and insatiable [illegible]. He rose above Joe Le Brun and

his gang because he was better equipped; he incurred their jealous hatred because he was their superior; he saw that men ostensibly holding the law, like Lieutenant Ambrose, were no less birds of prey than himself; he found it natural and not unpleasant to measure his wits constantly with those of others.

And through it all, making him the individual he was, he carried with him certain little nameless qualities, certain graces and courtly ways, which his mother had incubated in him before he was six years old, that sweet little mother who had told him of the fairies and much of the goodness of God.

CHAPTER V

THE LOVE OF POLLY LE BRUN

THAT Robert Ashe didn't have his rooms at the Palace, St. Francis, or Fairmont was due, not to the fact that he was without appreciation of the better hotels, but that they lacked appreciation of him. That he roomed in a second-class hostelry, where no questions were asked, was the outcome of Lieutenant Ambrose's dislike, jealousy, and some six months of methodical hounding.

But even in the faded gaudiness of his quarters at the Bella Francisca apartments he was unstintedly gay this bright, crisp March morning. The downpour of night before last, the drizzle of last night, were forgotten in the glad sunshine of today. There was no fog, the rains had washed the dirt from the city air, San Francisco's springtime had burst forth beautifully like a flower from the drab stalk of winter. From his window the golden sunlight upon the green of the Berkeley hills was a thing of sheer wonder. Upon the green-glass of the bay's surface a little, white-sailed fishing boat was highly worth the watching with a speculative smile upon one's lips.

Had the springtime been delayed a short twenty-four hours God alone knows into what miserable

thing the life of Robert Ashe might have been twisted. But the spring came swiftly, delicate like a flower, gay as a bright maiden singing, and Ashe breathed of it, harkened to it, was touched by it. Being natural in other things he was natural in this, that he responded to nature.

When a light knock came at his door he was sitting before his table, a pad of paper in front of him, a pencil in his fingers, his hair rumpled, his eyes on fire. Though he was a man all of whose senses were as keen as knife blades, he did not hear the knocking. It was not that he was thinking of a safe safely robbed; not that he remembered a bit of sharp business with Hamilton; not that he was occupied with considerations of what might be the next move of Lieutenant Ambrose. It was merely that out of the springtime a vision had sprung and that it had gripped a young dreamer.

Polly Le Brun, with little regard for the conventions, had rapped the once largely through force of habit. Now she tried the door, found it unlocked, and came in. From the threshold she looked toward him eagerly, her eyes scarcely less bright than his, a warm touch of pink in her dark cheeks.

Ashe threw down his pencil and came forward, his hands held out to her.

"Did you dance down to earth on a sunbeam?" he laughed to her, the extravagance which had sought expression through media of pencil and pad rising spontaneously to his lips. "Or did you come into being from blue air and a lark's song? You are seventeen times as pretty as a picture this

morning, Miss Polly. And the springtime has played havoc with you too, hasn't it! Pink flowers in your hat, pink flowers in your waist, pink roses in your cheeks! Do you feel like singing, Polly?"

"Ain't you the funny one," laughed Polly. "Saying things like that!"

"And dancing, Polly? Do you feel like that, too? And chasing foolish butterflies and diving in a swimming hole and running a race with your shadow, and lying on your back in the grass, building palaces out of the white clouds in the blue sky?"

Turning, he swept up a little, worn volume from the litter on his table.

"Hey, there!" cried Polly, coming in and closing the door. "I didn't come to have you read Mother Goose to me."

He tossed away the book, still laughing.

"Rosy is the West,
Rosy is the South,
Roses are her cheeks,
And a rose her mouth,"

he quoted happily. "Sounds like Mother Goose, doesn't it? But it's old father Tennyson, just feeling foolish and happy. The rest might just as well be,

"With a merry ding-dong,
Happy, gay and free.
With a merry sing-song,
Happy let us be."

"I tell you, Bobbie," expostulated Polly, seeking to be severe.

"And I tell you, Polly," he cut in upon her evident homily, "that it's springtime. What say you of this, Miss Polly:

"The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in his heaven . . .
All's right with the world."

"And then," he continued with no pause for the waiting impatience of Polly, "Sebald said: 'God's in his heaven!' Do you hear that? And I say, 'All's right with the world!' *That's* a triumphant line, Miss Polly Le Brun."

"Humph!" was Polly's sniff of a comment. "Is it? Maybe the guy that wrote that didn't crack safes for a living and didn't know a cop named Ambrose. You're a funny sort of fellow, Bobbie Ashe."

"Politely put, Polly! You mean I'm crazy? You're wrong. I'm just mad. An inspiration has come to me, Polly; I'm inspired, if you like; obsessed, if you prefer. I'm glad you came. I was about to try to write the morning into bad verse; now you've stopped me and I'm going to keep in tune with the springtime by living it! Living is better than writing, eh, Polly? I'm going for a vacation. Where's my hat?"

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, the shadow of uneasiness in her eyes. "Are you just stringing me? Where are you going?"

The words were accompanied by a quick flourish of the rarely sensitive hands; Polly marveled at the carefree boyishness of his wide smile, the brightness of his eyes.

"I'm going where a fellow can chase fool butterflies and run races with his shadow," he informed her with an assumption of gravity. "I'm going to visit the Lady Springtime in her own home. I'm going where I can satisfy certain lifelong curiosities. I've always wanted to know if there really are such things as big, mossy boulders with thin streams of clear, cold water trickling out from between them. I've always had a hankering to learn first hand a lot of things about lettuce and onions. I've always been consumed with curiosity about . . . pumpkins!"

"Punkins?" said Polly.

"Exactly," he nodded back at her. "What kind of a bush they grow on, you know. I . . . I have never told anyone before, Polly, . . . but I am not sure they don't dig 'em, like potatoes, you know."

"Do punkins grow this time of year?" asked the practical Polly.

"We could telephone the grocery man at the corner," he suggested. "But, no; he'd lie about it. Grocers always come to the telephone prepared to lie about their goods, and can't help it. No; I'll go find out, Polly."

"Rats!" said Polly, laughing a little. Then, a look of frank admiration in her eyes, "You've got the coolest nerve of any man I ever saw, Bobbie Ashe. Here you loot a safe less'n two days ago and

the whole mob of cops is after you. On top of that you've bled a man for a wad of money . . . Oh, Ambrose told dad and I'm not asleep all the time I'm snoring! . . . And now you carry it off like a man that hadn't ever even broke a speed law. And talk to me about going to pick punkins!"

She looked at him severely. Although she did not know it, Polly was quite as mad this morning as was Ashe. No doubt the springtime, triumphant in a march down cobbled streets and cement sidewalks, had something to do with the matter in her case, too. Polly was consumed with the warmth of her desire to mother something, to mother the thing she loved most in all the world. In her old-young eyes Bobbie Ashe was utterly boyish just now with his rumpled hair and dancing eyes; more than that he stood alone and many men, Ambrose, her father, the goggled stranger, were so many crouching, hungry wolves, ready to spring out of the shadows upon him and drag him down. It was Polly's own affair how she had learned of what was afoot; while she did not know everything she suspected much. The knowledge and resultant suspicion combined had brought her in haste to Ashe's rooms.

Now, a man may have the light so strong in his eyes that he cannot see clearly. Had Ashe not been, as he put it, divinely mad this morning, had his soul not been filled with the mysteries and beauties of such things as moss-covered boulders and yellow-bellied pumpkins, he must have seen that which stood bright and naked in the girl's look. As it was he saw in Polly Le Brun merely the pretty girl who was as close a friend as any he had, whom he wished

well but of whom he had never dreamed of thinking sentimentally. She was giving him a frank love which would have sent a fierce blaze through Lieutenant Ambrose; in Ashe's mind a picture was taking form of himself sitting upon the top rail of a fence, chewing at a wisp of green grass, watching a comfortably grunting sow suckling a greedy lot of pigs.

Polly, quite used to Ashe's flashing moods, catalogued them as "joshing fits," and refused to take them seriously. So now. Not yet had she realized how much he meant of what he put into his babble of pumpkins and butterflies. How could a man, standing in a position such as she knew his to be, mean a word of it? The gates of a penitentiary were yawning for him and Polly, knowing it, felt that Ashe must be as poignantly aware of it as herself.

"Bobbie Ashe," she said very soberly, "you've got to cut out this funny business and come alive. They're after you and they mean business this time. If it was just Ambrose I wouldn't be scared; I guess you can be one too much for him most any time he stacks up against you single handed. But papa's in cahoots with him, and Joe Le Brun never went after a man yet he didn't get."

Her words jarred against the lightness of Ashe's mood. He frowned, then laughed carelessly.

"They can't get me, Polly," he told her with youthful assurance. "If your worthy father gets obstreperous I've got a certain magic word to whisper into his ear and he'll drop the business like a hot brick. As for Ambrose . . ." He lifted his shoul-

ders in a contemptuous shrug. "I've been playing tag with him for half a year."

Polly, while openly admiring, shook her head. Maybe Ashe knew what he was talking about with just Joe Le Brun and Ambrose opposing him; Polly doubted it for no one knew better than she the resourcefulness and stubbornness of her father when once he sought to run down a man. But there was the third person, the goggled stranger, the Unknown Quantity, clothed with a real terror to her chiefly because he elected to be cloaked in mystery. Polly had come to speak of him, to tell Ashe what she knew and what she feared, her suspicions that he was the envoy of a powerful enemy or perhaps some highup of the secret service. She knew enough to sense a "frame-up." And her experience and observation were large enough to tell her that a frame-up, into which a police officer, a gangster, and an Unknown Quantity entered, was a terrible thing with which to cope.

All of this and more was at the tip of her tongue when Ashe quite inadvertently opened a new vista for consideration and so sealed for himself one avenue of escape.

"You are a good kid, Polly," he said. Polly caught hungrily at the words, her heartbeat quickening. But the heartbeats came only the slower with the realization that while sincerity lay back of the words, there was utterly lacking that deeper emotion which, had it prompted the speech, would have made her heart leap with the great joy.

"I always seem to take your kindnesses to me sort of as a matter of course, I'm afraid," he smiled at

her. "I believe that I forget half of the time that Joe Le Brun is your father, that his fortunes are yours, that you are doing a wonderfully unselfish thing in siding with me. I don't know that I ought to let you come to me this way. One of these days it's going to make positive trouble between you and your father."

Polly's hard little laugh startled him.

"Trouble, did you say? It busted wide open last night. Papa and Ambrose and the other guy were cooking up their dirty mess and it's Polly to take a chance on getting wised up. Ambrose's big ears wouldn't miss the noise the fog makes scraping along the alley walls; he yanks the door open and there's me, looking fussed and getting red. 'Hey, Joe,' he sneers, dragging me in. 'Here's Polly getting thirsty again!' And before we're through I slap Ambrose's face so my hand hurts and papa gets fresh and I slap *his* face. I was for yanking off No Name's goggles in the mix-up, to get a better squint at him when they throw me off stage and shut the door and don't talk so loud."

"I didn't want it to come to this," said Ashe gravely. "I didn't want you to quarrel with Le Brun. Nor with Ambrose. You must make up with them some way, Polly."

"Make up?" she flared out angrily. "I'll see the whole crowd in hell first! If they think I'm going to stand by and see 'em double cross you. . . ."

She broke off abruptly, biting her lips. Her breast was suddenly tumultuous with her quick breathing. As Ashe looked wonderingly at her she stared back in a queer sort of defiance, stared until her two cheeks

went as red as red blood could make them, until she dashed her hand across her eyes as she grew hot with a new sort of shame and a fierce anger at him, at herself, at the world in general.

God knows Polly Le Brun was no prude; conventions were for her insignificant obstacles which might clutter the path for another but which she thrust aside with an impatient foot. But deep down where the real Polly Le Brun existed, deep down under the badness of her and the boldness of her, was the pure womanliness which, stung suddenly, writhed under that look in Ashe's eyes. And Bobbie Ashe, professional thief, gifted none the less with that wonderful quality, a rare, innate delicacy drawn from his father's blood, suckled from his mother's milk, instilled in an infancy in which body and brain and soul expand so swiftly, absorb so intimately, understood. Understood, almost clearly, that which Polly herself could but grope after blindly. His finer nature saw the beauty of the instinctive emotion which had set the girl trembling. Even while he was painfully at loss for the thing to say or do he knew that the poems in his books were not so fine as the love in the soul of poor little Polly Le Brun.

"Polly," he said softly. "Polly . . . "

"I'm a crazy little fool!" she cried, dabbing angrily at her eyes. "I . . . Oh, I'm a fool."

"Polly," he said.

Again she flung up her head defiantly. But in her eyes was something more than challenge. There was hunger unhidden, yearning, not to be disguised no matter how bravely Polly struggled with it. And, so many things may crowd into one swift,

tragic look, there was something there probing deep, seeking eagerly, striving to find that she need not be ashamed of her shame. And in the end she laughed a trifle uncertainly and hysterically and dabbed at her eyes again and turned away.

"You've always been mighty good to me, Polly," the boy said slowly. "I've always liked you better than anybody else I knew, too. But I didn't quite understand, Polly . . . "

"Understand?" Polly jerked her head up, her wet eyes hard upon his, her voice hard. "Understand what?"

It was hard to frame the words in reply but he saw the futility of evasion and procrastination.

"That you felt . . . like this."

Polly's little sniff, a familiar weapon, was something of a failure. But at this moment of high tension it did as well as another.

In a general way Bobbie Ashe wished well to every fellow voyager bound down the great stream of life. He could rob an overfull safe or pick a bulging pocket with the merriest heart in the world; it is very much to be doubted if, though a golden reward were offered him, he could have borne to have wounded the feelings of a little child or of the old woman who sold papers at the corner of Kearney and Market. He was a criminal but no vandal; he was a thief but none the less a gentleman.

Of keenly sensitive nature himself, he felt swiftly and sharply for Polly in the distress which at last was so obvious to him. With no knowledge of the subtleties of a woman's soul; with no understanding of the meaning of love other than that drawn vaguely

from the songs of the amorous poets, he sought none the less to deal with the solution of the girl's problem. So, quite naturally, although with the most kindly intentions in the world, he did the wrong thing.

His mind raced. Polly thought that she was in love because it was her time of life to feel the first thrills of the tender passion; she believed herself to be in love with him because he happened to be on hand at the psychological time. Here was the thought with which Ashe began. From it, shaping other thoughts swiftly, he went on before he spoke. Polly had been led to bestow this first, romantic affection upon him very largely for the reason that he stood alone, one against all; because she had been of help to him; because he had at all times shown to her a certain courtesy which he and no other man had ever bestowed upon her. All that Ashe had to do now . . . so he thought . . . was to show her that he did not need her, that he had never appreciated her, that he was not the man she had believed him. He saw the tendrils of the girl's passion which were above the surface; it was not given him to guess what roots pierced downward, into what depth they reached.

Whereas Polly's first sniff had been an utter failure that young woman had not stopped there. There had been love in her heart, then shame, then anger. She sniffed again. Her eyes were dry now; they met Ashe's steadily. Polly Le Brun was sprung from fighting stock. That second sniff was an unqualified, crowning triumph.

"Let's get back on the boat," said Polly sharply. "Don't you go and get off on the wrong foot, Bobbie

Ashe, just because a girl slips you a tip now and then. Here I come to tell you . . . "

"By Golly, Polly," cut in Ashe, half deceived by the girl's quick change of manner and tone but still determined to go ahead with the line of action he had worked out, "I've got something to tell you! You won't tell anyone, will you? In a whole lot less than a week's work I've cleaned up pretty close to ten thousand dollars! No; I haven't got it in my pocket, but it's where I can grab it on the run. And what do you think I'm going to do with it?" He blew a kiss out of the window from the slender tips of his fingers, lightly. "I'm going to say good-bye to little old San Francisco town and go to see what I can see. As you said they are going to try to make it pretty hot here for me; well, I'll move on!"

"Right away?" asked Polly quickly.

He nodded: "Right away."

"For good, Polly." And then, since even in the game he was playing he couldn't bring himself to be utterly heartless, he added: "Not until I've bought you such a present that you'll remember me always, Polly. Not until we've had such a dinner you never dreamed of before."

Polly looked at him shrewdly.

"That's what you meant about punkins and things?"

"That's what I meant."

Polly's taut heartstrings quivered then, and in spite of her pride her pink cheeks paled. What would San Francisco be without Bobbie Ashe? What would life, *her* dull little life, be without him?

And I won't ever see you again, maybe for years and years?"

"Maybe not until you are happily married, Polly, and there's another little Polly, just like her mamma, only not quite so pretty . . ."

She winced at that and flushed. But she interrupted him, saying:

"You'll be the one that's getting married."

Ashe laughed lightly.

"Who knows? Soon or late the Great Adventure will come to me as it does to all men." Then he added, to say the one last desperate thing: "Some day I'll find Her! She'll be a great Lady, Polly, wondrously beautiful. She'll be one of my own people; one of the kind my mother was."

"La, la," laughed Polly artificially. "You're just the kind to fall for some haymaker's daughter chewing a straw and feeding the chickens!"

In her heart was a wild fierceness which Ashe did not see. What she had come to tell him she let go unsaid. In another moment she was perched upon his table, and had picked up his telephone.

"Say, Dickie," she was giggling to Lieutenant Ambrose. "I've got the swellest appetite today you ever dreamed about. How about taking me out to dinner at Tait's? You're on, Dickie!"

To Ashe from the doorway where she paused a moment, her cheeks roses again, her eyes dancing, her mouth a red temptation, she said brightly,

"You'll tell me good-bye before you go, won't you, Bobbie?"

She didn't wait for his answer. He could hear her tall French heels clicking in the hallway.

"Close to ten thousand dollars this haul," he mused, his eyes bright with his inspiration. "And plenty more when that's gone. And there's a big French car at Lamont's which will go mighty well with your little French heels, Miss Polly!"

So he called up Lamont's.

CHAPTER VI

THE STETHERIL DIAMOND

ROBERT ASHE was young. Youth explains much. It is the time of boiling blood and bubbling spirits. He was, after all, a boy and something of a poet. Such a one in another time and in his own fashion may have been François Villon.

As he was driven back to the Bella Francisca in the big French car which had cost him all that he had extorted from Hamilton Hamilton and which was to be his little gift to Polly Le Brun, his heart was standing high in his breast. Tonight he would go secretly to the hiding place where the contents of the looted safe awaited his coming . . . that small hollow at the end of a Mission Street wharf sheltered by a weathered pile, covered by a bit of two-inch plank, into which in the olden days he had hidden his pettier pilferings . . . later he would see Polly and leave her gasping over his present to her. Then, not because he feared the law or the man who twisted it to his own purposes, but because the springtime lured to her woodsy haunts and because he felt deeply for Polly Le Brun, he would take the ferry for Sixteenth Street and a train on the other side. His chauffeur, paid to do nothing else, waited for

him. He ran up to his room, as gay as he knew how to be, which is saying a good deal. The clamor of his telephone, which had been ringing almost incessantly for upwards of an hour, put him in touch with Polly.

"Say, Bobbie," her voice clearly excited although with a note in it which Ashe had never heard and which now he could not explain, "I want to see you the worst way. Suppose we go out to lunch together?"

"What is it this time, Polly?"

Polly hesitated briefly, seeming actually at a loss for words, a thing new in Polly. But in a moment she had explained just enough to make clear that she was very anxious to talk over with Ashe some matter of tremendous importance to her.

With a sweeping, farewell look at his room Ashe picked up a couple of worn little volumes, thrust one into each coat pocket and went out, the remainder of his belongings upon the instant consigned to the next lodger or to the landlord. Dismissing his chauffeur with instructions for the afternoon and morrow he boarded a street car and hurried the half dozen blocks to a meeting with Polly.

Never in all of his merry life had Robert Ashe been gayer than today. He was going upon his vacation; he was traveling light; he was building kaleidoscopic pictures of the things the Country would offer to a spirit surfeited with the City. Just where in the country he was going he did not know. But he was going tramping down through the green fields; he was going to know the smell of his own camp-fire in his nostrils; perchance he would fry his own fish;

certainly he would know the tang of pine forests. He was in California; he need not be at a loss for whatever he sought; he need not worry his brain with the mysteries of time tables, either. Any train, going in any direction, would carry him out of cobbled streets and into fragrant lanes.

Yes, Polly was excited and, he thought at first, vaguely troubled. But, with a quick laugh, she assured him that that was "all in his eye," and leading the way to a secluded table in a secluded little café she told him what she wanted.

"You're doing a hot-foot out of 'Frisco; so'm I," said Polly. "Maybe I look like a door mat; but when a man goes to wipe his number tens on me he finds I ain't."

"Ambrose?" demanded Ashe sharply.

"Papa," returned Polly, emphasizing her attitude by a twitch of her nose. "Do you know, I believe I'm the first one that ever slapped Joe Le Brun's face . . . good and hard! He didn't like it. This morning, after I went home from your place, he was waiting for me. He started in by telling me what he thought about you. When he got through I said, 'But he's got pretty eyes, ain't he, Dad?'" Polly laughed. "When the balloon ascension was over he looked like it had made him seasick."

"Polly," said Ashe gravely, his gay eyes suddenly troubled, "I'm sorry."

"Scat!" said Polly. "Can't I fight with papa without the *Examiner* getting out an extra? But it's this way, Bobbie: We did fight and fight hard. I saw what was coming, and before papa got the chance to tell me to beat it and take my baggage,

I told him good night. I'm not going back, either."

Now Polly Le Brun, as will become evident later on, was lying. But her eyes, level upon Ashe's, studying his changing expressions, told nothing which Polly would not corroborate with her lips.

Ashe was frankly distressed. Polly, save for the little sign of the twisting of her slim fingers about her wine glass, was never more at ease in her whole life. For Polly, playing now for big stakes, was in all essentials the daughter of Joe Le Brun.

"The whole thing was because of me?" asked Ashe. "Just because you . . . "

"You haven't changed your mind about the punkins?"

"No, Polly. I was going to take a train tonight."

"Well, while it's going to be tough on 'Frisco Town I guess we both drift about the same day. I got a swell girl friend down in Los Angeles. That's where my ticket's going to read."

"Hadn't you better see your father again?"

"Feeling like you was to blame?" said Polly. "And wanting to see me squared? Well, I guess I *have* took your part once or twice; but I never forgot, Bobbie Ashe, that when my time came to get in wrong somewhere I could count on you. Am I right?"

"Of course you're right, Polly. If there's anything I can do . . . "

"There sure is. I'm off for the South, but when I go traveling I don't want to go like a washerwoman." She opened her purse with a sudden jerk, spilling upon the stained cloth a half dozen small silver pieces.

"That's my bank! Hey, Waiter. Help yourself! And now," as the waiter withdrew, taking with him the last of Polly's two-bit and ten-cent pieces, "you understand?"

"I understand," smiled Ashe. "It will take me about an hour."

Polly laid a detaining hand upon his arm as he was pushing back his chair. Ashe meant to sell a car he had so recently purchased, to hand over to Polly whatever sum might be realized upon a hurried, sacrifice sale. But Polly meant otherwise.

"No you don't, Bobbie!" she told him, a little catch for the instant making her voice uncertain. "You'd split even with me if I'd let you; you'd slip me the whole thing if I asked you to; but I won't. I ain't taking anything off you but a few hours of your time. If you won't do the thing my way . . ."

She lifted her shoulders.

That night the frame-up against Robert Ashe, widely known among those of his profession as Lady-fingers, was very skilfully engineered; the frame-up into which even poor little, desperate Polly Le Brun had at last entered. Because he was deeply grateful to her for her friendship; because he felt that she had tipped the balance beyond his power to restore it to its normalcy by putting into the scales that priceless thing which is a woman's love for a man; because now that he thought her in need of assistance from a situation into which she had been led by her loyalty to him, she asked him point blank

to do a hazardous thing, he looked neither for the hazard nor for her lack of logic in asking it.

It was a part of his life, a very essential part, to take chances. Here was a risk to run greater than he knew, but no little risk even as he looked at the matter. And yet, feeling as he did toward the gangster's daughter, it did not enter his mind to refuse Polly her favor.

Polly, seeing herself about to lose her young god, feeling, though with a pang, that the strength of her beauty could not hold him, had had recourse to the last argument. Whether she held him by love or by hatred, whether by fair means or treachery, hold him she would if it were within the power of Polly Le Brun. While Ashe was buying a car for her Polly was talking earnestly with Richard Ambrose.

Ambrose didn't believe at first, and didn't understand when at last he did believe. Here was Polly offering to put Ladyfingers into the policeman's clutches; offering to guarantee that the frame-up was without a flaw; offering then to help Ambrose bleed Ashe of the ten thousand dollars they both knew he had appropriated during the last three days; Ambrose's part simply to make the arrest at the proper time; to threaten Ashe with conviction; then turn the boy loose when he had emptied his pockets.

"Oh, I know you want to land Bobbie in the pen," she said to him sharply. "But you'd rather have ten or twelve thousand dollars any day in the week. Papa knows I'm sore on Ladyfingers; I've talked with him and the guy in goggles. The frame-up's

cold and sure. I'll see that Ashe falls for it. All you got to do is make the arrest, get Goggles' coin . . . Oh, I don't care what you do with it! Keep it all or split with Joe Le Brun; it's all the same to me . . . frisk Ashe for all he's got and then let him go. That's easy, ain't it? I wish a man would show me an easier way to corner that much safe money!"

"Where do you get off?" demanded Ambrose, stabbing at her through the narrowed suspicion of his eyes.

"Me?" said Polly loftily. "I get off the same as usual: on both my feet!"

The plan to be worked into the frame-up was that of the stranger in goggles. Polly, consumed with curiosity concerning the root of this man's interest in Robert Ashe, was constrained to postpone investigation in this quarter and reckon with the essential fact that the stranger wanted Robert Ashe successfully "framed," convicted, and sentenced to a long term in San Quentin. Ambrose, for his part grasped this obvious fact and also that what Polly wanted was the robbing of Ashe but a guarantee of his being allowed to go free thereafter. The stranger offered five thousand dollars for the arrest at the proper moment; Polly showed the way to another ten thousand; Lieutenant Ambrose, coveting both rewards, communed with his own soul and decided that since he must double cross somebody it might as well be Polly. And, incidentally, Ladyfingers himself.

"I'll put him in the pen," had been Ambrose's conclusion. "And I'll put *her* where I want her before I am through."

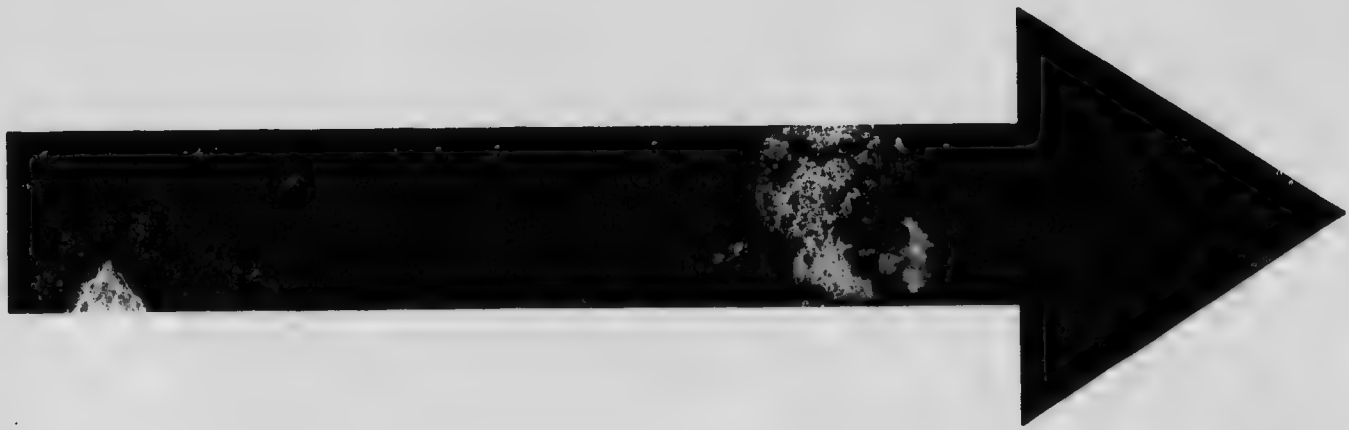
Ladyfingers

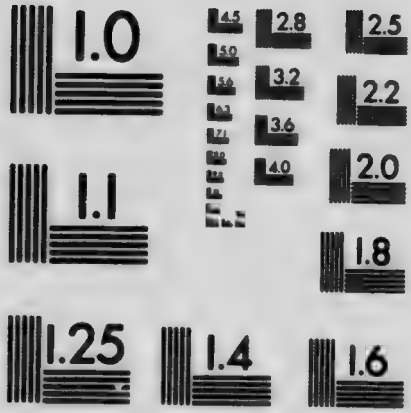
The newspaper clipping which Polly Le Brun had put into Ashe's hands was one which the stranger had shown to Le Brun and Lieutenant Ambrose that first night of his coming. It had been cut from a society column and had told how tonight the Sinclair Sutcliffes of Piedmont were staging a brilliant social function at their palatial mansion *et cetera*. Mrs. Rachel Stetheril . . . *the* Rachel Stetheril, . . . was to scintillate in the galaxy . . . or, rather, through it, her unusual luminosity being due to her many millions and the famous Stetheril diamond which it seemed it was her custom to wear upon the rare occasions of appearing at social functions. The diamond, so the society editor made emphatic, was not to be bought for fifty thousand dollars. And Polly, little Polly Le Brun, asked Bobbie Ashe if he please would go get it for her. When she insisted, putting the matter in the light of a favor,

"Certainly," Bobbie Ashe had responded.

The plot against Ladyfingers ran smoothly like clockwork to one critical point. The guests were shown through the elaborate gardens where the new Florentine statues were; Lieutenant Ambrose with an assistant was there, modestly in the shadows; Rachel Stetheril, an amazingly old woman with an amazingly rude way of snapping up people who sought to be nice to her, was there; the Stetheril diamond was there. Also, at Mrs. Rachel Stetheril's sharp elbow was a gentleman who kept almost as jealously in little patches of shadow as did Lieutenant Ambrose and who wore a muffler drawn high up about his throat as though he had a bad cold.

Warned in time, breaking through the shrubbery, a fugitive with his name shouted after him





MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

Out of these shadows, at a certain moment while the guests were enraptured at the sight of a marble nymph getting ready most unblushingly to take a bath, stepped a young gentleman, smiling, handsome, pleasing to look upon. As simply as a street fakir conjures a rabbit out of your silk hat he had transferred a diamond from an old woman's corsage into his own shapely hand. Then it was that no longer he plans for the night went like clockwork.

Lieutenant Ambrose, whom Ashe had sneered at s lacking imagination, had considered the work of the evening merely that of trapping a mere man. He dealt in criminals and thought that he knew the breed. The thing which he didn't understand was genius. What he couldn't comprehend was a being like Robert Ashe, a being of wonderful nerves and rare instinct.

For one moment the diamond was in Ashe's hand. That moment was the signal for Ambrose and his assistant to spring forward. There was the sound of a blow; a woman's shrill shriek; a puff of smoke in the still air and the smell of burnt powder in the nostrils as a pistol barked; a bystander yonder clutching at his breast and going down spilling enough blood to redden the turf and the sheets of the sensational dailies for many a day thereafter; the diamond struck from the thief's hand, lying in the grass; and Ladyfingers, warned in time, breaking through the shrubbery, a fugitive with his name shouted after him.

From the episode Lieutenant Richard Ambrose drew nothing but the bitter sense of having blundered. Polly Le Brun's reward was greater. At her

door the next morning stood a rich French car; in her mail came a receipt for five thousand dollars from the Lamont Automobile Company. It was a gift and she knew whence it came. Polly Le Brun, staring from letter to car, cursed them both violently . . . and then put her face into her hands and cried.

CHAPTER VII

THE FUGITIVE

IT may be said that almost from the day when he had stolen his first unripe banana Robert Ashe had planned for tonight. If the time ever came to him when his destiny dictated, "Run for it!" he would squander no precious moments either in indecision or yet in dashing madly down a blind alley.

Run, in all literal truth, he did now, and like a frightened deer. So much was compulsory since Ambrose was breaking through the shrubbery after him, shooting as he came. But not heedlessly. A seasoned general in his own particular kind of campaigning, an essential part of his cool brain never lost thought of the one proper avenue of retreat.

Now, even as Polly's diamond was struck from his hand, he knew exactly what he would do. He was defeated in this engagement; but there was the comforting thought that

> "He who fights and runs away
> May live to fight another day."

And so Ashe ran.

To hit a running figure in an uncertain light is by no means so simple a thing in marksmanship as it might be. Ambrose's bullets went wild. To make matters worse for the ambitious lieutenant of police

Ambrose had lost his temper. Ashe vaulted a low fence, turned to his right without looking . . . he had looked as he came in . . . sped between two imposing concrete residences, came out into a street, turned again to his right, raced down a quiet block, turned another corner, passed through the back yards of three more of Oakland's ostentatious homes, through a lot where a house was building, through another garden. Here a moment he stopped, resting. And while he rested he lighted a cigar. Then again he went on, now walking briskly, once more beginning to breathe normally.

He turned in at the front entrance of a veritable palace in glistening cement and rang the doorbell. To the maid who appeared almost immediately he said quietly,

"A crime has been committed. At the Sinclair Sutcliffes'. An attempt to rob Mrs. Rachel Stetheril. May I use your telephone?"

For the maid's edification he threw back the lapel of his coat, showing the bright nickel star of a detective's authority.

The maid, duly impressed and excited, let him come in and leaving him standing by the door hastened with word to her mistress. A tall, slim girl, not over twenty, came quickly and stood by a little anxiously while Ashe telephoned.

Taking no pains to conceal the urgency of the matter he found time none the less to impress the girl with the fact that a man might be a detective and yet a gentleman with a charming personality. He called San Francisco, got Chief of Police Hurlburt, and said swiftly,

"This is Ambrose. In Piedmont. Ladyfingers tried to put one over at the Sinclair Sutcliffe affair. Mrs. Rachel Stetheril's diamond, you know. No; he's got clean away so far. But I'll get him before morning. Can you call up the Oakland Chief and have him lend me a couple of men? Tell him I'll be at Fourteenth and Broadway just as soon as I can get there."

Leaving a very deeply surprised Chief of Police staring at his telephone in San Francisco, Ashe clicked up his receiver.

"I am very sorry I was obliged to trouble you," he smiled at the mistress and maid who had remained standing near him, listening. "But, as you see, the case was urgent. You can't understand, perhaps, just what success or failure will mean to me tonight. And now," the telephone book in his hands, "may I call another number? If I can beat the street cars down town . . . get a taxi, you know . . ."

"Wait." The thing which Ashe had hoped for came quite as he wished it. "Mrs. Hampton's car is in the garage. I'll have George drive you. And I *do* wish you success."

The maid ran eagerly upon her errand of finding the chauffeur; the mistress herself opened the door for Ashe.

"And *you* can't understand, perhaps," she said, turning upon him a pair of eyes that he had time to note were sparkling with excitement, "just what your success or failure will mean to me tonight. The thief got away with the diamond, you said?"

"Why, I believe not," Ashe told her. "It was knocked from his hand, falling to the grass . . ."

"Good!" she clapped her hands. "You see," she explained, "I rather count some day upon the Stetheril diamond being mine!"

"Yours!" he looked his amazement.

"Yes. Rachel Stetheril is a grand-aunt of mine. She is staying here tonight. I'm her nearest of kin, I believe. I should have been with her when the thing happened only . . ." She lifted her white shoulders and her black brows in a way prettily reminiscent of the French, somehow giving him the impression that while the Sinclair Sutcliffes were a very nice sort of people, still . . .

She and Ashe stepped outside. Already a man was unlocking the double doors of the garage in the rear of the gardens. This Ashe saw with satisfaction. But another sight, almost at the same instant, checked the words upon his lips and shot his heart up into his throat. Just turning in from the sidewalk, not fifty feet from him, were a man and a woman, the man noteworthy for the muffler drawn up about his throat, the woman none other than Mrs. Rachel Stetheril.

"Here she is now!" cried the girl.

"You'll explain how urgent the matter is?" Already the boy had run down the stairs. "That I couldn't stop? May I call to thank you tomorrow?"

He ran through the garden, about the corner of the house and to the garage. And as he went he heard a man running after him.

George had the car out, the motor drumming eagerly. The uniformed maid, her hands clasped, was trembling with the excitement of the chase. Ashe leaped into the tonneau, crying sharply,

"Cut her loose."

"Hold on, George!" The voice, sharper than Ashe's, came from the man in the muffler. "There's a mistake here."

"There's no mistake," snapped Ashe, recognizing clearly enough the danger of delay. "A crime has been committed and the criminal will make a clear get-away if we stand here all night." Desperately he played his one card, his eyes keenly watchful to [illegible] it turned out a high trump or a joker which [illegible] crept into his deck; he threw back his coat so [illegible] both men might see the nickeled emblem. "I [illegible]"

"Oh, I know who you are," came the quick rejoinder. "And the thief won't get away at all! The police know right where to lay their hands on him. I . . . I want to talk with you. Damn it!" as the maid came closer to listen and George turned half around to stare in puzzled fashion. "Drive around the block."

He jumped in, slammed the door after him, and George turned the big car out toward the street. Ashe, no less puzzled than George, but believing himself ready for whatever might come, kept his muscles on the alert, his mind wide awake.

Even as the car leaped forward the man at Ashe's elbow began to speak hurriedly, his voice too low for George to hear.

"Do as I say," he said bluntly, "and do it blindfold. Or I'll hand you over to Lieutenant Ambrose. Which is it?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Ashe.

"I'm Justin Haddon," said the other abruptly.

"Remember the name. Justin Haddon. Lawyer. Retained by Rachel Stetheril. You are Robert Ashe, known as Ladyfingers. You've got to have a new name if you do as I tell you. Since you are a thief, I'll name you Steele. You can choose your own given name."

"Thanks," returned Ashe coolly. "I'll choose Damascus. Damascus Steele always did sound well to me . . . And, when we're great friends, you can call me Dam' Steele for short!"

"While we've never met until this afternoon," went on Haddon swiftly, "you are my new secretary. A common friend . . . Charlie Brewer of Sacramento . . . gave you a letter to me."

"It happens," said Ashe, mystified, but sensing a chance for safety in obliging Haddon, "that I've told the young lady back there that my name was Ambrose and that I'm on the force in the City."

"Hell!" muttered Haddon. For a little, while the machine raced on, he sat hunched over, staring fixedly at nothing. Then, suddenly, he straightened up.

"You are a friend of the chief in San Francisco," he said. "In an amateurish way you are interested in crime. He fixed you up with a badge and let you free lance on this case. He had a tip that something was going to happen. But the Ambrose part . . ."

"Ambrose Steele," grinned Ashe. "If you like, Dam' Ambrose Steele."

"All right," said Haddon. "George, drive back to the house."

"Drive slowly, George," added Ashe. "Now,

Haddon," he went on, seeing that he would have little time for coming to a conclusion and never losing sight of the importance of choosing the right path, "hadn't you better explain a little?"

"Not a bit," said Haddon. "You do what I tell you to do and I'll see you through. Balk, and, by God, I'll send you to the penitentiary. Which is it?"

For a moment Ashe was silent, thinking swiftly. He saw Haddon's jaw, hard set, Haddon's mouth, grim lipped. He would have given a great deal for a look into Haddon's hidden eyes.

The car stopped in front of the house. Rachel Stetheril and the girl had evidently gone indoors. There was no one here but Haddon and George . . .

"I think," said Ashe in that clear, cool young voice of his, "that as names go Damascus Ambrose Steele is hard to beat."

And slipping his arm through that of Mr. Justin Haddon he walked blithely with his new employer to the door beyond which was the woman he had sought to rob for the sake of Polly Le Brun.

As the maid opened the door,

"But the diamond!" a girl's voice was saying.

And in the sharp, acid voice of that sharp, acid woman, Rachel Stetheril, came the words:

"Damn the diamond! I'm sick of hearing of it. And I'm sick of those fool Sutcliffes. Make me some tea and find out when the next train leaves. I'm going home."

"Surely not tonight, Aunt Rachel!"

"Tonight," snapped Aunt Rachel. "Oakland makes me sick. And you're going with me. You've

got more sense than I thought you had. When did you have gumption enough to quarrel with that she-dog of a Sutcliffe woman?"

Then it was that Ashe and Haddon entered.

"Mrs. Stetheril," said Haddon, his manner suddenly so deferential as to be on the verge of servility, "may I introduce Mr. Ambrose Steele? My new secretary whom I am taking back to Lockworth when we go. Miss Daly, Mr. Steele."

"But," gasped Evelyn. "I thought . . ."

Ashe, having bowed, laughed lightly.

"That I was a professional detective? God forbid! A sort of a free lance, an amateur, just for a night, you know . . ."

"But you have given up?" cried Evelyn. "And the thief who has Auntie's diamond . . ."

"The diamond . . . I thought that he dropped it . . ."

"Didn't I say damn the diamond!" snapped Rachel Stetheril. And then, turning her bright old eyes upon Ashe, eyes which had the wisdom of a century in them and the hardness of eternity, "Come here. I said, come here, sir!"

Ashe, still smiling, obeyed. As he came quite close Mrs. Stetheril suddenly thrust forward her head, her eyes now not six inches from his own. And, although his heart was sinking, although he felt that surely she would recognize the man who had sought to rob her, he continued to smile.

He had never seen eyes quite like those of Rachel Stetheril: hard they were and bright and as black as jet. Their piercing regard was turned upon his face with an almost terrible intentness. Then

suddenly, as though instinctively, the penetrating look was lowered to his hands, delicate, sensitive hands, looking too fine for a man's but too strong for a woman's. Rachel Stetheril's eyes frowned and she sniffed disgustedly.

"Humph!" said the old woman. "Evelyn, go make my tea. Haddon, we take the next train home. Yes, you and Evelyn and Steel and any more live stock you want . . . What the devil do you want with a secretary, anyhow? Are you getting so rich off of me that you can afford a hired man to do your work?"

"Mrs. Stetheril," began Haddon with dignity, "surely you . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" cried the old woman. "For God's sake, shut up!"

Evelyn, flashing a quick look at Ashe, went to prepare Rachel Stetheril's tea.

CHAPTER VIII

CHANGE OF SCENE

LADYFINGERS sat in the sun, upon the top rail of a high fence, and watched a grunting sow suckling her incredibly large litter of amazingly hungry pigs.

"I have dreamed a dream and the dream has come true!" he mused within himself, conscious of a vast satisfaction.

He had a clean wisp of fresh, fragrant straw between his teeth, the rolling sweep of a green-carpeted valley before his eyes, the bursting springtime in his heart, a vision in his soul, and the great round world under his feet. In his pocket, since there had been neither time nor opportunity for a visit to the Mission Street pier, were a few small silver coins. He drew them forth, smiled at them, and tossed them down to the sow and pigs. The sow sniffed at them and lay back grunting lazily; the pigs were not to be diverted from their breakfasting by the inconsequential glitter. Ladyfingers laughed.

If in all of Lockworth Valley, a valley of contented souls, there were this morning a happier individual than Robert Ashe, then surely must that radiant person be in hiding, with his consuming joy, under some great haystack. For not yet had the

sun snone upon him. Last night there had been a moment when the boy had been lifted high upon the mounting wave of his own destiny, when it lay in the future whether he would be hurled downward into a black maelstrom, chaotic and menacing, or laid lightly upon the sunkissed beach of a fairy island.

But now he could forget that moment so supremely tense. Now he could look across the miles of the valley to the calm, big boled oaks gathered like a parliament of kings upon the foothills; now he could breathe an air which seemed to draw its subtle fragrance from blue sky, golden sun, and the tender green of the meadow lands, and which put a new ecstasy into his soul; now almost he felt that he could kneel like some old pagan "suckled in a creed outworn" and pour out his gushing thanks that he had been led into a vale of the earthly paradise. Now he could love life like a sweetheart; now could he adore the earth itself as though she were a woman. For now she was one who, courted long, drew her veil aside and smiled at him. Tenderness was in her look and promise and surrender; the fragrance of her intoxicated his soul; her arms were about him; yonder, where the fields swelled gently, were her warm breasts seeming actually to stir under the soft green of her robe.

Last night his brain had been seething with suspicions, pricked by innumerable questions demanding their answers. How had it chanced that Ambrose had been on hand at the Sutcliffes'? Had the thing been that frame-up which Polly had mentioned? Was Polly at last a traitor to his interests?

Why had Justin Haddon, Mrs. Stetheril's lawyer, shielded him? These were but a few of the questions which suggested so many others. Today they were all unanswered. Just now they did not seem to matter. He was like a schoolboy who, knowing that he should be in his classroom struggling with an examination in Improper Fractions, goes racing away with his dog across the fields, concerned utterly with ground squirrels, cottontails, and an ultimate swimming hole.

From his perch upon the enclosure fence Ashe surveyed what was to be seen of the valley somewhat with the eye of a proprietor. He noted the general checkerboard design and found that it was saved from geometrical hideousness by the budding branches of the fruit trees themselves which boisterously had defied the pruning knife's command to symmetry, and by the stirring fields of wheat and barley intersected joyously and illogically by the springtime rivulets. Lockworth Creek itself, the sovereign to which these little fellows paid tribute, could be seen from here demanding further tribute of three bridges across the long lane between the fertile fields which was the county road running straight to Lockworth Town.

The town, three or four miles away, cresting a broad-based, flat-topped hill, its white walls and clambering rose vines granted a sweet daintiness by the distance, looked the fairy capital of the happy valley. Even the track of the narrow gauge railway connecting the village with the main line junction, hidden, happily, by the blue wall of mountains to the west, fitted not inharmoniously into the

placidity of the landscape, looking rather like toy rails than the crude iron path of material traffic. The black column of smoke standing aloft and mightily staining the blue of the sky might be . . . as it was in fact . . . a signal that the Stetheril mills were grinding; Ashe chose to look upon it as a vast, billowing plume floating bannerwise over the valley.

"It's all mine; it belongs to me!"

So he chose to muse though he knew well enough to whom it belonged. The narrow gauge railroad belonged to Rachel Stetheril; the mills under the smoke plume were Rachel Stetheril's; the great, verandahed, three-storied, white-columned house set like a palace in its ten acres of lawn and garden a mile to the eastward of the village was Rachel Stetheril's; the five hundred acres of vineyard yonder, the thousands of acres there which now looked like velvety lawns, but which as the months passed would rustle in russet, heavy with bearded heads of ripe grain . . . these were Rachel Stetheril's. The man teaming over yonder, now cracking his long whip lazily over the long, lazy ears of his mules, the woman about to meet him, driving her fat mare in the swinging shafts of an ancient top buggy . . . were they no less Rachel Stetheril's since the hard old woman could make or break them, at her will and in an instant? But this morning there could exist in the heart of Rachel Stetheril no securer sense of ownership of the wide fields, the big barns and little cottages, the grazing stock and growing green things, than was to be found in the breast of Robert Ashe, known erstwhile as Lady-

fingers, the San Francisco thief, set, as by magic, in the place where he most wished to be.

The mood of the valley made of his mood something rarely sympathetic. He was half inclined to feel sorry for such as Richard Ambrose and Joe Le Brun. Whether or not Polly had "double crossed" him, he was unqualifiedly sorry for her, pitied her in the poor little wretched life wherein from barren grapes she sought to tread out a little of life's wine of joy. What chance had she ever had since her mother bore her daughter to Joe Le Brun, sister to San Francisco's cobbles?

But of these he thought only dimly. Justin Haddon . . . Ashe had at last seen his eyes, the eyes of a nervous man who, perhaps, was attempting something too big for him, something he had better left alone . . . was, the boy believed, something of a rascal. But rascals were, according to his way of thinking, all right in their place, and he was prepared to like Haddon. He was even ready . . . and the thought was at the root of the smile which he turned upon the world at large . . . to like Rachel Stetheril. She was, to be sure, an old savage; she barked at people rather than spoke humanly; when displeased she glared vilely, like an old witch, poison-eyed; she cursed wickedly when she was irritated, which she was, so far as Ashe could judge, all the time; she would have slapped a porter's face last night had he not been precipitate in the mode of his departure; she had dubbed her grand-niece a chit of a fool, Haddon a damned dunce, Ashe himself a booby, all in one venomous gasp last night when she misplaced her tall umbrella and no one

found it quickly enough to suit her. And yet, "I'll bet she's not half as bad as her growl!" mused Ashe.

And her grand-niece, Evelyn Daly? Ashe himself had said to Polly Le Brun, "Soon or late the Great Adventure comes to all men." And he had said further, in the same strain, "She will be a great lady; one of my mother's sort of people; of my own true class." Now that his world was speeding through a new orbit, impelled lustily by some agent of white magic, was the realization of another dream to be granted the favored adventurer? Was Evelyn the She of his prophecy?

The girl was high bred. That showed in the fine delicacy of her features, in the swift, cool regard of her long-lashed eyes, in the carriage of her head, the poise of her slender body. Cultured she was and, what is more, refined. And Ashe she accepted as one of her own station, treated as one of her own rank. That, while the pleasure to him arising from it subtly defied analysis, flattered him. Was then this girl of the upper class, born to a life which had been the boy's birthright, but which he had never known intimately save in his dreamings, destined to be the true Lady of his Romance? Did she not embody all of those things that had been wanting from the life of a San Francisco thief? For is it not at once logic and nature for one to yearn for that which has always been beyond his possession?

What Ashe knew of the way of a gentleman, that rare, natural thing with so many cheap imitations, came to him in subconsciously remembered precepts from his mother, in fragmentary scraps from the sad talk of a broken Englishman, and, most of

all, from his reading chivalric tales. The bow with which he bent over Evelyn's hand upon telling her good night was a story-book bow such as had not been seen in the region of San Francisco Bay for a long, practical generation. The little phrases which came so naturally to his smiling lips might have been uttered in an earlier incarnation at the court of King Arthur. His deportment toward Rachel Stetheril was quite that of a young knight, gay in his newly-won, golden spurs, rising from his knees before a great queen. And certain it is, that if a shrewd pair of old eyes stared at him wickedly, another pair of eyes, scarcely less intent, followed him brightly. Justin Haddon, whose attitude toward Evelyn was very much that of an accepted suitor, appeared suddenly a trifle stiff in his manner and looked displeased.

Whether or not he had already begun his Great Adventure Ashe did not know; he did know that he was quite prepared to fall in love. He did know that the year was at the spring and the day at the morning; that most unquestionably the distant hillsides were dew-pearled; that there could be no doubt that that joyous thing floating above the fields was a lark, a meadow lark, to be sure, but sprinkling its morning song in liquid notes, full-throatedly; that God must be in his heaven since certainly all was right with the world down here.

CHAPTER IX

THE TALE OF OLD MAN BEESON

OLD man Beeson, the most hoary of all the many retainers in the service of Rachel Stetheril, nowadays did little more than talk and smoke his corncob pipe and draw his monthly pay. More than anything else did he love to sit at the door of his cabin down in the meadow, where it was discreetly hidden by the creek's willows from the Big House, but where it stood forth boldly to the winding country road, and talk.

He had long ago come to that point where a man, though he sit in the sun of today, does his living under the stars of yesterday. He had no concern with present politics, weather, or crops. He told you either of the election of Garfield, the rains of '64, or the corn that used to grow right out yonder where you see that pesky stuff. And he told you most eagerly . . . for here was a topic upon which old man Beeson had no one left to gainsay him, no printed statistics to argue against him . . . of the girlhood of Rachel Stetheril.

Old man Beeson never wore a hat and never lost his hair. But his hair grew white, his eyes weren't much use to him after late afternoon, his ears brought him word of the great world in a muffled undertone,

his mind wandered. Still, he told a circumstantial tale . . . or rather the story told itself, grown automatic through countless repetitions, sounding faint in his own ears.

"Close to eighty year, is she? Pooh! What's that? Ain't I close on to a hunderd? Why, I remember" . . .

Eagerly then, his voice trembling a little just as his uplifted hand shook, he talked swiftly until he had made sure that he had his listener "hooked." Then he staged his scenes with deliberate elaborateness, arranged his climaxes, builded his mysteries, lingered over his dramatic pauses.

For every year which life added to his score it would seem that old man Beeson went a year further back into the life that had been. Now had he reached the year 1837 when an English merchant named George Stetheril came first with three ships like Columbus to the New World. But George Stetheril came into California and for the most part stayed there, becoming a part of the country, marrying the daughter of a stately old Spaniard, building the basement and first story of the Stetheril wealth. With him had come a boy named Willie Beeson.

"Grand folks they was in England, too," old man Beeson had come to tell . . . although there were those who could remember that some twenty years ago he had not gone so far as this in his epic; indeed, old man Warner, who claimed to be as old as Beeson himself and who upon all possible opportunities called his rival an old fool, maintained that George Stetheril had been the son of a poor and unimportant country squire. . . . "Grand folks," Beeson would

repeat, wagging his head. "Such as didn't turn a hair at a quiet game of cribbage with a dook nor yet a mug of ale with a earl. Yes, sir; when George Stetheril was a man gone thirty and I was an upstandin' lad of ten, we come acrost the ocean and here we be ever since in Californy, George until he died, me until this very minute."

Old man Warner had been in the valley for forty years. Upon any matter which had occurred during that time in the Stetheril annals he served as an eager critic of old man Beeson's tale. But upon happenings antedating his coming to Lockworth he was, perforce, nervously and suspiciously tongue-tied. And here old man Beeson went as far as he liked.

If you took Beeson's word for it . . . and it was either be satisfied with that or construct an entirely imaginary history for yourself since no one ever came into the valley sufficiently mad to interrogate the only other person qualified to speak upon it . . . Rachel Stetheril once upon a time had been a girl. The thing sounded incredible; it is to be doubted if old man Warner ever gave credence to it; but none the less stoutly did old man Beeson maintain it as a sort of axiomatic truth upon which the whole fabric of his legend stood. She had been a pretty girl at that; he flung the statement at a listener defiantly, challenging him to carry *that* to old man Warner for refutation! Moreover she had been gay-hearted and full of vivacity, mischief, and tenderness, all mixed up. Yes, sir.

"Oh, yes," old man Beeson would invariably add after this, one of his dramatic pauses, "that was a

right smart time ago. I do believe," he would chuckle evilly, "it was some time before Abe Warner ever come to Lockworth. Might have been before I was born. Dunno."

He'd admit thoughtfully that even in her glad girlhood Rachel Stetheril had been stubborn; also that, when things didn't go just to suit her, she could display the hot temper of a yellow-jacket. Time was that he'd make this statement cautiously, dropping his voice, looking around him to see that no new listener had come up. Now he cried it out triumphantly in his thin old voice; dad burn it, he didn't care who heard it. And indeed, secure in his garrulous old age, old man Beeson had perhaps less fear of Rachel Stetheril than had anyone else in the entire length and breadth of the valley.

She had had one sister. Always, until the last couple of years, Beeson had spoken familiarly of this other, calling her Alice. It was noted here of late that while he still told of Rachel's sister he was satisfied in terming her the other Stetheril girl. Old man Warner seized upon the fact and went clacking up and down Lockworth with it, giggling like a schoolgirl, averring that "the doddering old fool had forgot what her name was and, most likely, would be calling her Mary next time." The sister, a little younger than Rachel, had not had Rachel's lasting qualities. Old man Beeson was a trifle ashamed of her; she had died when only sixty-seven.

For Beeson's purposes Alice Stetheril had no intrinsic importance on earth. But Evelyn Daly had to be accounted for, Evelyn Daly was known to be the heiress to the many millions that had rolled up

in the Stetheril name; and Evelyn was the great-granddaughter of Alice, hence the great grand-niece of Rachel herself. This was clear in old man Beeson's mind because of oft-repeated insistence upon it, even when the mind itself was no longer clear.

Here he would pause again, suck his pipe, scratch his ear and get his "second wind." For all this was but the prologue to his tale. And then the tale itself, the tale whose telling drove old man Warner into purple, vein-swelling rage. For many a time had some one of the newer comers into the valley asked, "Is that so, Mr. Warner?" and he could only snap back, "Dunno. I wasn't here then. But most likely it's a lie, seeing who said it!" And of late it was a rare joy to be able to add, "Why, the fuddled old fool don't even rec'lect the names of the people he's trying to tell about!"

Anyway, Beeson was still in his own exclusive demesne. Rachel Stetheril had married a man of whom Beeson spoke with open contempt; the fellow had died when on the wrong side, that is the under side, of forty. It was because she had been ashamed of him rather than for any of the numerous reasons set forward by rumor that Rachel Stetheril had resumed her own maiden name after his death Beeson no longer showed his teeth upon making this point for obvious reasons; but make it he still continued to do with emphasis.

There had been a child, a daughter, and Rachel had been mad about her. But she had grown up and married a cigar maker's son when she might have had a banker's and in many other ways showed

the whole countryside the sort she was. She spent all that her mother gave her, which as time went by was less and less. Maybe old man Warner could remember her?

"A blue-eyed thing," said old man Beeson.

"Brown-eyed," said old man Warner.

"A little thing and as pretty as a picture," said old man Beeson. "Just like her mother was sixty year ago. Plump, you know. Cozy."

"Tall, slim thing," said old man Warner. "Not much to look at, but good hearted."

"Fell in love with a man named Ellis, a good-for-nothing son of a cigar maker that couldn't support her after she married him; just as Rachel Stetheril had warned her. . . ."

"Was forced into marriage with a man she hated, the son of old Ellis, a sort of tobacco king, that old she-devil of a Stetheril woman nagging at her until the poor girl give in. . . ."

"And all these years," said old man Beeson, "things went bad for Rachel Stetheril and she got stubborner and stubborner and sharper and sharper. When the daughter that she loved up and left her with that fool husband of hers; and when *her* husband died and she wouldn't come back unless Rachel Stetheril begged her to, which, being Rachel Stetheril, she wouldn't do; and when *she* died, not even leaving a girl baby after her to be a granddaughter in the Big House, Rachel Stetheril got bitterer and bitterer and meaner and meaner and took it all out upon everybody that come across her path. And now there's that Evelyn Daly . . . she's the granddaughter of Rachel Stetheril's sister . . . and *she*'ll

up and marry the wrong fellow; and *she*'ll up and die; and then there won't be a thing left of the proud old Stetheril family but Rachel Stetheril and me."

And, here of late, at the end of his own tale, a suspicious shining wetness came into old man Beeson's eyes.

So much of Rachel Stetheril did Robert Ashe in due time come to know when once he stopped at old man Beeson's cabin. He wondered, even then, whom Evelyn Daly would some day marry.

CHAPTER X

THE OLD BLACK WITCH

AS was her custom without reference to the season of the year and whether clocks ticked or stopped Rachel Stetheril rose at a quarter of six in the morning. At six exactly she was unfolding her napkin over her little table in the breakfast room. At that identical moment a very obviously nervous girl . . . her name during the years had been at one time Maggie, at another Sara, at another Em'ly, but always was she a nervous girl! . . . was placing a cup of hot coffee at Rachel Stetheril's place and watching her mistress anxiously for a sign to tell whether she was to say "Good morning!" or to keep her mouth shut. At this same magic hour of six a very nervous cook . . . no matter what her name, she was always as nervous as the serving maid . . . was standing quite near the door from kitchen to breakfast room, listening for what might be the first sounds to come to her. Whenever she discharged a cook, and this was a thing she had done many a time, Rachel Stetheril had done it over her breakfast. Upon days that she was particularly, in the sense of unusually, sour tempered, Rachel Stetheril's snappishness seemed a thing that had swelled in the night and had, at six o'clock, blossomed into full blown flower.

As was her custom Rachel Stetheril was out of the house at fifteen minutes after six. In the wide path leading to the wide front doors she was met by Huxter, the head gardener. Huxter answered any questions she might choose to put to him, and if the time seemed propitious . . . that is, if upon having looked in at the kitchen window he had already seen the serving maid nod to the cook that it was "all right," . . . he offered certain remarks of his own about the grounds and what he should today require of the men under him.

Huxter's daily audience with Rachel Stetheril lasted anywhere from five seconds to three minutes, and from it he took unto himself great glory and a very remarkable swagger. Thereafter his mistress proceeded with quick, jerky little steps down the broad path, leaning a little more heavily each year upon her tall black stick. In the dull black, fashionless dress she wore she looked like nothing more in the world than a little beetle whose way had led through a dusty road.

Then there was Young Beeson tugging hard at the bits of a span of devil-hearted greys, black Joe of her own importation to doff his hat, grin whitely, take her elbow and help her to a seat, and away they went, greys, Young Beeson, Joe, and Rachel Stetheril, upon an endless tour of inspection.

As was the custom of another person in whose veins was the Stetheril blood, equally disdainful of weather and clocks, Evelyn awoke at some indefinite time between nine and eleven. She yawned prettily after the manner of a healthy young animal, stretched luxuriously and dozed again. Thereafter in due time

she rose, arranged herself daintily in warm slippers, "boodie" cap, and flowered kimono. In a house like this where there were always bells to ring and servants to come hastening at the first tinkle, she rang. But not until she had seen in a glass just how much good her sleep had done her. This morning her eyes were very bright, her coloring a hint of a tint more than perfect.

She rang. A rosy cheeked maid, whose position was enviable ordinarily in the Big House but who had her work cut out for her during the visits of Evelyn Daly, came and attended the many wants of the city girl.

"My hair, Browdy," said Miss Evelyn.

Browdy . . . everyone else on earth who knew her termed her Jennie, but for all that her father's name was Browdy and she was a servant and in the sort of literature which Evelyn affected she would have been known as Browdy in spite of her fresh cheeked prettiness and amazing dimples. . . . Browdy, then, combed Miss Daly's hair while Miss Daly herself gave her undivided attention to the diurnal needs of her pink nails.

"That will do, Browdy," said Miss Evelyn. "I'll arrange it myself. My pearl grey slippers this morning."

Browdy got the slippers and with one in each plump little hand and something akin to amusement in her wide blue eyes stood just far enough to the side and behind her mistress to be out of danger of being seen in the mirror and watched. Slowly, as the shining hair was caught up and wound, twisted into a gleaming coil and transfixed with a pin here

brought down and impaled there, made finally into the latest thing in morning coiffures, the look of amusement went out of Browdy's bright eyes and into them entered interest and approval. There would be a dance in Lockworth in the course of a week or so and Browdy would be there and . . . there were compensations after all, in being lady's maid to such as Evelyn Daly.

Evelyn turned unexpectedly and Browdy, flushing, came forward swiftly, offering the slippers.

"You look very pretty, Miss Evelyn," she said. "Awful pretty."

"The grey gown, Browdy. The one I told you to be careful of last night."

Browdy got it. Also stockings, lingerie, ribbons, pins, everything needed and asked for.

Evelyn, dressed, examined herself with frank interest. A caressing hand came away from her hair, administered a touch of powder to the tip of her nose, went back to her hair.

"I need a flower," she said. "Browdy, are there any roses in bloom now? Big ones? White, or pink?"

Browdy gasped and widened her eyes.

"I forgot!" she exclaimed, and with the whisk of skirts and the slam of a door, was gone. Evelyn sighed.

As quickly as her plump little feet could carry her down a long flight of winding stairs, along a longer hallway, back through the hallway and again up the stairs, Browdy made her flying trip.

"I found 'em the first thing this morning," she explained breathlessly. "On the table in the hall under the window."

Ladyfingers

They were a great bunch of white roses, some full blown, some mere dainty buds, all fresh and fragrant and caught together by a piece of twine. From the twine fluttered a bit of paper.

Browdy's bright eyes fairly sparkled now; so, in truth, did Evelyn's. From maid's hands the flowers went quickly to mistress's. Upon the paper was the typewritten legend,

"*For Miss Evelyn Daly.*"

Now, suddenly, surely Evelyn's eyes were brighter than Jennie Browdy's; her cheeks pinker. For a moment she held the fragrant roses against her cheek. Then, with deft fingers selecting the queen of the white galaxy of superb flowers, she arranged it in her hair.

"That will be all, Browdy."

With her own hands she placed the other flowers in water.

Browdy turned to depart, having already tidied the room. Evelyn, the typewritten bit of paper in her hand, called after the girl softly.

"Aunt Rachel has gone out?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, Miss. Hours ago."

"And . . . Has anyone called this morning?"

Browdy shook her curly head.

"Mr. Haddon hasn't . . ."

"Oh, yes, Miss," cried Browdy. "I didn't think about him."

"He didn't stop? And . . . there wasn't anyone with him?"

"There was though," cried Browdy. "A young man, just a boy to look at." She blushed and

dropped her eyes. Ashe had smiled at her this morning and had lifted his hat to her in a way which little Jennie Browdy had not known before to be possible. "Cook says he's Mr. Haddon's new secretary."

"Did he . . . That's all, Browdy."

Browdy went and Evelyn turned back to the roses. The little slip of paper came in for a most curious and interested study. The flowers spelled Romance; the note, typewritten and unsigned, hinted at Mystery. A little ecstatic thrill was the result to their combined appeal to the romantic soul of Miss Evelyn Daly.

"He's like a Prince in a Fairy Tale!" she whispered. And Evelyn, the impressionable, dwelt lingeringly upon the latest man to enter her frippery existence, her fancies picturing him vividly from head to foot and not failing to make much of the significance of the most beautiful hands she had ever seen. To her they spelled blue blood and romance.

Then Evelyn went down to breakfast. She was conscious of a satisfying, vastly pleasurable exhilaration this morning. In all things essentially a city girl she was glad to be in the country. In town she had maid only when she could borrow one at the home where she chanced to be a guest. Other things, scarcely less desirable, she could have only in proportion with the latest check which her Aunt Rachel had happened to send her. In some matters Rachel Stetheril was extremely methodical; in others as markedly erratic. When there came a letter from the Lockworth bank Evelyn never opened it but that her fingers shook and her heart skipped beats. She

might unfold a check for five hundred dollars; the paper might on the other hand read, "Pay to the order of Evelyn Daly Twenty-five dollars," the wretched paucity made emphatic by the "and no cents" which Evelyn detested on general principles.

But here there was a maid; here Evelyn might ring for what other servants she liked and they would come promptly; here she might at a moment's notice have saddle horse, carriage, or automobile; the conveyance she chose would carry her like a story-book princess into Lockworth where people nudged each other and pointed her out, and there, whatever the stores held, she might have by casually mentioning her aunt's name. And always the baggage man handling Evelyn's trunks in the little town knew that they came from the city light and went back heavy. What he did not know, being a mere man, was that the material of the finest gowns which the young lady wore in San Francisco had been specially imported from that city, passed over a counter in Lockworth, duly charged to the account of Rachel Stetheril, packed carefully away, subsequently journeying back whence it had come, there to be made up into creations altogether befitting the Stetheril heiress.

In the warm glow of satisfaction experienced this morning by Miss Daly, all of these matters mingled their influence with that of a mysterious present. As in the case of Bobbie Ashe she could feel that the day was still at the morn, the morning at eleven which was every bit as good as seven even to the matter of rhyme, and that all was as it should be in the world.

"It couldn't have been Justin . . ." she mused

over her coffee. "He wouldn't have thought; if he had he would have shattered the joy of the thing by writing in big letters, 'Yours Faithfully, Justin Haddon.' No; it wasn't Justin!"

She had quite a happy, sociable time over her breakfast. True, there was no one with her in the little sunflooded room but the serving maid, and in her preoccupation Evelyn had not observed in what manner and through what agent her food came before her. But none the less she was in the society of one who understood her, one who sympathized with her, one who made allowances for her shortcomings and magically changed them into virtues; in short she was upon terms of lively intimacy with that most charming person, Miss Evelyn Daly, heiress to the Stetheril millions.

The girl in the neat white apron and cap asked, "Soft boiled eggs this morning, Miss Daly?"

And Evelyn, not to be interrupted in her soul talk with the heiress, said to the latter,

"He *is* mysterious! There is mystery in his eyes . . . and poetry and romance! He *is* like a Prince in a Fairy Tale! And he is a friend of the chief of police; he is an amateur detective. He dabbles in crime as other men play with politics!"

The thought was delightful and from it was born a delicious little shudder which caused the attendant Jane to close the door for fear of a draft.

On her down through the long, spacious hallway Evelyn peeped in at the open door of Rachel Stetheril's office. Here a typewriter was clicking like mad under the fingers of Adrian Graham, the old woman's latest private secretary. Evelyn saw

that here there had been no change since her last visit, wrinkled her nose at Graham's bent back and passed on. The young man with his straight, straw colored hair, bleak looking eyes, and frostbitten face had no place in the errant fancies of Evelyn Daly.

"I wonder," she asked herself as she came into the great dim music room where her grey slippers sank deep into rich rugs and where much stately furniture forgot its dignity and winked at her with the stolen light from the edges of drawn shades, "if he has ever *lived* any of the life which he has seen through a detective's eyes? If he, himself, has a past with mysteries in it?"

Again the little thrill, the delicious shudder at the creation of her own vivid imaginings.

"I wonder," she went on, "if I really do love Justin? Or . . . "

She laughed softly to herself, still richly content with the exclusive company of an exclusive heiress, and going to the piano sent the rollicking strains of a piece of glad music into the remotest corner of the Big House. In the midst of her playing she stopped abruptly to rearrange the rose in her hair. She had discovered, across the dim room, her own face in a mirror, looking, so she told the Heiress, like a dream girl . . . from another Fairy Story. Or from the same one! What other matters came into her mind she didn't confess even to her sympathetic confidante; but as she got up from the piano the tender tint in her cheeks had deepened. And she shook a grave finger at the fairy dream girl as she went, quite as though in warning.

She was cuddled up nicely in a monster lounging

chair upon the porch sunning herself, her face protected by the drooping brim of a wide Panama, a late novel hastily absorbed as far as page ninety, when there came to her the sound of wheels and hoofs upon the gravel of the driveway. Magically the book disappeared . . . to be sure Rachel Stetheril would know nothing either of the title or the author, but the numerous full page illustrations were most startlingly interesting! . . . and turned a laughing, sunny face up toward the frowning, wintry one bent over a crooked stick.

"For all things in the world she *does* look just like a Black Witch!" said Evelyn to the Heiress. "Good morning, Auntie," said Evelyn to Rachel Stetheril. "I've had the most delightful morning!"

Rachel Stetheril had come up the flight of stone steps from the garden with a sprightly alacrity which at once fascinated and amazed her great-grandniece. For while the old woman seemed to look ten years older for each year that passed until now she was the visible personification of decrepit old age, hollow eyed, hollow cheeked, with a witch's nose and chin drawing ever closer each other as the mouth receded . . . while she looked all this if you managed to catch her an instant in repose which was an achievement you might boast of, in action she seemed younger this morning than she had been ten years ago. The brightness of her eyes bespoke the quickness of her mind; the sharpness of her tongue was ample sign of the nimbleness of her temper; the birdlike alertness in the carriage of her head, the grim set of her long fingers about her stick, the quick step, all bespoke the woman's character.

Now she hobbled down the porch until she bent over Evelyn's chair, her hard, wise old eyes gimleting after whatever the girl might hold secretly in her mind and actually making Evelyn wonder if they saw the naughty latest thing in books under the thick cushions.

"You're a pretty thing," snapped the old woman.

"Thank you, Auntie," said Evelyn, clearly pleased at such a remark from such a quarter.

"Oh, don't thank *me*," cut in Rachel Stetheril, tapping viciously with her stick. "So's a butterfly pretty. Long on looks and short on brains. Most likely your head's chuck full of looking-glasses and fools in breeches. . . . Where's Haddon?"

Still Evelyn smiled, accepting her great-grand-aunt as a true philosopher accepts an unpleasant change in the weather.

"I haven't seen Mr. Haddon this morning," she answered quietly.

"Morning!" grunted the old woman. "It's afternoon and time for lunch and I told Haddon to be here at twelve. If the fool doesn't know which side his bread's buttered on and who butters it for him he doesn't know much."

Evelyn peeped slyly at her watch. The little golden hands pointed at two full minutes after twelve.

"Graham!" cried Mrs. Stetheril, lifting her sharp shrill voice with such sudden vehemence that fully half a dozen servants in the house and about the grounds started anxiously. "Graham!"

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril."

The answer in the expressionless voice of the

young man with the frostbitten face sounded ridiculously flat after the old woman's lively call. It was preceded by a cessation of the faint clicking of a distant typewriter and immediately followed by the sound of Adrian Graham's soft-footed approach.

"What do you think of this new secretary of Haddon's?" demanded Mrs. Stetheril. Of Evelyn, obviously, since not yet had Graham come out of the house.

"I . . . Why, what should I think, Auntie?" She lifted her very innocent looking eyes to her aunt's. "I hardly know him, you know. He *seems* very nice."

"What does Haddon want a secretary for?" queried Mrs. Stetheril sharply, her eyes keen upon Evelyn's.

"Why," smiled Evelyn, "he says that he is very busy and needs someone to take a lot of the routine work off his hands. Also, he told me last night that he is writing a book, a sort of . . . "

"Book!" jeered the old woman. "Justin Haddon rite a book! Is the man plumb mad?"

"I don't know, Auntie," came pleasantly with Evelyn's little laugh. "He says that there is a demand for a . . . Oh, I don't quite know what it is; a sort of handbook of legal information or something of that kind. And . . ."

"When did he tell you all this?" asked her aunt, eyeing her with sharpness vaguely mingled with suspicion.

"Last night. While we were . . ."

"Humph! Last night without any warning he takes on a secretary, Justin Haddon who doesn't

need one any more than I need wings, and who's as tight as a rain barrel. On top of that he's going to write a book . . . Oh! You're here, are you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril. You called . . ."

"Don't tell me what I did," she snapped at Graham who had come up so quietly that she had not heard him. "That's no reason for you to come creeping up on me like a footpad." She glared at him for an instant and then jeeringly announced, "I always did have my suspicions of a man that went slinking around in rubber soles."

"You may remember, Mrs. Stetheril," he began with an assumption of dignity very unsuccessfully done under her hard eyes, a dignity which seemed actually pale, colorless, as though it were a thing he kept in the dark cellar of his being and now had dragged out into the sunlight, "that you, yourself, suggested . . ."

"Shut up!" she cried out at him, jerking up her great stick as though she would strike him with it. "Shut up! . . . What have you done about this Bond affair?"

"The bond affair?" he asked stiffly, conscious of Evelyn's interested observation and being, after all, human. "May I ask what particular bond affair?"

"Oh, you dunce!" she clacked at him. "What particular bond affair! *The* Bond affair. Bond. Capital B. B-o-n-d. Bond! It's a man's name. A man might be named Bramble or Spinach, I suppose, if he wanted to. Some men ought to be named Tom Fool. I'm talking about Arnold Bond, a man, cashier of the Lockworth National Bank."

It all came down upon poor Adrian Graham in an avalanche of hurtling, heated words, and though he got his mouth open and kept it open until she was done no words came from it immediately. His face was red, and one less implacable than the Black Witch herself must have felt sorry for him.

"I telephoned Mr. Bond this morning, as per your instructions!" he at last got out. "He said that unfortunately nothing had been done yet. I urged him to give the matter his early attention. . . ."

"Early attention!" sneered Rachel Stetheril. "And I'm to wait like a simpering schoolgirl upon his pleasure and convenience, am I? You . . . you . . . you're fired!" she ended bluntly.

"Really, Mrs. Stetheril," he began weakly, "I fail to see . . ."

"So does a bat!" she cut him short. "That's one reason you're fired. Now, don't stand there gasping. Pack your traps and get!"

"That's one fool the less getting under my feet," she grunted less to Evelyn than to herself as Graham turned and went swiftly and noiselessly back into the house. "And now what's Haddon doing? Drat the man."

"They're coming!" cried Evelyn.

And in a moment they had swung into the driveway and drawn up in front of the house, Haddon and Ashe. They came quickly up the steps, Justin Haddon slightly in advance, his eye bright and eager, a little flush in his usually sallow cheeks. Behind him, more leisurely, came Robert Ashe, his hat already in hand as he caught sight of Evelyn and Mrs. Stetheril, his eyes going swiftly from the

sour face bent over the cane to the smiling one lifted expectantly.

In Haddon's manner as he greeted his employer pleasantly and then put out his hands to the girl was to be marked a lack of the hint of nervousness of yesterday, its place taken by a sort of assurance which bespoke satisfaction with things as they were, confidence in his future. It was quite as though until now he had been attempting something which lay almost beyond his powers; as though now he were sure of himself.

Ashe, his eyes dancing with the joy of a splendid morning, watched Haddon and Evelyn with frank interest. Their relationship was not yet entirely plain to him and he was interested in knowing what it was. At times there was about Haddon the little air of proprietorship which suggested that vows had been interchanged; at times Evelyn seemed to accept him quite naturally as her future husband; at other times the girl had flashed her eyes at Ashe himself in a way which might be construed to read, "I am heart whole and fancy free!"

But it was only an instant that he watched them, forgetting Rachel Stetheril. He heard Haddon saying, "You are looking wonderfully, Evelyn! One night with us has taken that tired look out of your eyes. You must never go back to the city." He noticed that Haddon's voice rang with an ardor he had never detected in it before; he observed that Evelyn looked at first pleased; then that a quick half frown came to mar the pleasure in her eyes; . . . and then he turned quickly, conscious of a keen, steady, wonderfully penetrating

regard from the hard inscrutable eyes of Rachel Stetheril.

She continued to stare at him a moment, her stick tapping at the porch floor, her scrutiny thrusting at him like a surgeon's lancet. Ashe met her gaze frankly, smiling into her fierce old eyes.

"So," she said after her abrupt fashion, "you think you're going to be Haddon's private secretary, eh?"

"Yes," he told her pleasantly.

"Understand stenography?" she shot at him.

"No, I don't. But it will hardly . . ."

"Typewrite?"

"Well enough to get across with it," he laughed. "I can't say that I'm an expert at it, but . . ."

A "but" was always a signal for an invasion by Rachel Stetheril's bellicose army of words, and now she made her sharp flank attack by demanding,

"Well, what *are* you expert on? Anything?"

"Life, Lyric Poetry, and . . . and Pumpkins!" he laughed back at her.

As she had done before he had turned, so now again did she study him silently, her mouth clamped tight shut, her black witch eyes unblinking under her grey brows.

"What do you mean by that?" she snapped. And then, as Ashe was framing a reply, "No; I haven't time for tomfoolery. Only, young man, don't you try to make fun of me! Remember that. . . . Haddon!"

Haddon, releasing Evelyn's hand, turned to Mrs. Stetheril.

"Did you see Arnold Bond this morning? What did he say?"

"I didn't see him, Mrs. Stetheril. He had gone out to Jake Dutton's ranch about a mortgage. . . . "

"What do I care about Jake Dutton or his ranch or his mortgage or his wife or his cow!" she spat the words at him. "You're as bad as that fool Graham. Why in the devil didn't you go to Jake Dutton's after him?"

"Because," Haddon explained quite calmly, "it seemed to me that it would be better not to try to rush Bond unduly. He left word that he would see me this afternoon. And unfortunately conditions are such that we are in no position to coerce Bond in this matter."

"Conditions? What conditions?"

"Why," said Haddon slowly, "if we come right down to it we've got to do exactly what Bond says do. The law of the matter . . . "

"The law!" scoffed the old woman. "The law! Here a little hop-o'-my-thumb like you tells me about the law."

"Being a lawyer," returned Haddon, coloring a little under the whip of her words, "I naturally supposed that that was just what you had retained me for."

"If you ever get anywhere, Justin Haddon," she barked at him, "it'll be because of luck. Don't go to fooling yourself that you've got brains. If there's any law that counts in this valley it's because I made it. I fired Graham just now."

"Indeed?" Haddon feeling no great interest didn't pretend to feel any. But her next words brought that emotion quite unfeigned and keen into his eyes.

"So I'm going to take over your new secretary for mine. Steele," glaring at Ashe, "you go to work for me. And right after lunch. And the first thing you do is call up Arnold Bond on the telephone and tell him that if he isn't knocking at my door in an hour's time I'm going to put him out of business if it takes every cent I've got. Have you got sense enough to do that?"

Ashe turned questioning eyes upon Haddon. Haddon, plainly surprised and no little disturbed, said quickly,

"But, Mrs. Stetheril, surely . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" she told him, falling back upon her familiar weapon. "If you don't like it you've got to lump it. I need Steele more than you do and he's going to work for me. If you need a secretary so mighty bad all of a sudden go get one."

"The work I wanted Steele to do," . . . began Haddon. "He isn't exactly fitted . . ."

Rachel Stetheril lifted her stick and poked it out so that one end came to wavering rest under Haddon's nose.

"Justin Haddon," she reminded him, "you'd better not fool with me today. You walk as you're told or I'll hand you a dose of the same medicine I'm cooking up for Arnold Bond."

And having ended the discussion entirely to her satisfaction she led the way to the dining room, jerking along like a little dusty, venomous beetle.

CHAPTER XI

WHO GOT THE DIAMOND?

ACROSS the book-littered top of a great table upon the third story of the Big House Justin Haddon scowled savagely while Robert Ashe, returning his regard, smiled.

"The old she-devil!" muttered Haddon angrily, but taking care not to speak loudly. "By God! I've got a mind to . . ."

Ashe waited a second, hoping the man would go on. Then, seeing Haddon sinking back into a profound and gloomy thoughtfulness, he laughed lightly.

"Is she spoiling your game?" he asked. And then when Haddon continued to stare at him in that heavy silence and to pluck, pluck, pluck at his lip, he added softly: "Why not let me in on the know? It doesn't take a mind reader to see that you're up to something crooked. Maybe I can help play the game . . . from the inside."

"Maybe you could," said Haddon. "Maybe you could!"

He got up and went to a window, flipping up the shade and standing there a moment looking out into the moonlit night. Ashe, turning a little where he sat, watched him with a keen interest

which was not without its hint of amusement. It struck him humorously that just now if there were in the world a man who should be worrying it was himself, and that, for some unguessed reason, Haddon had taken his load off his shoulders. Had a third person just then looked in upon the two men, had he been told, "One of them is right now in the shadow of the gates of San Quentin," then must he have deemed Haddon the fugitive from justice.

"Do you know," said Haddon, wheeling suddenly, "that you are walking on damned thin ice?"

"Wrong again!" grinned the boy. "I am not walking at all! I soar high above the sordid earth through realms of ineffable joy. I am where I would be, transported by the hand of magic. Or, if you don't like my first figure, I've hitched my cart to the tail of your comet and am joy-riding through the clouds."

In Haddon's stare there was both curiosity and admiration.

"You're a cool young devil," he grunted.

"Suggesting the ice of your former remark," laughed Ashe. "Thin ice, I think you said? And that, in turn, implying a plunge?"

During the long afternoon Evelyn Daly had wandered idly about the grounds, been admired distantly by Huxter, the head gardener, of whose warm approval she was by no means unconscious, had played snatches upon the piano, skimmed through the remaining pages of her book, and in other broken ways had spent the hours lonesomely.

For she had caught no glimpse after lunch of her aunt nor of Haddon nor yet of the new Mr. Steele. Mrs. Stetheril had kept both her impressed secretary and her attorney extremely busy in her office. Bond had called and the old woman had scolded, threatened, abused him. Evelyn had peeped in at them, and had felt sorry for the good-looking Bond. He had shrugged his rather broad shoulders under the old woman's abuse, had kept perfect control of the muscles of his decidedly pleasant face and had gone his way at last, making no promise to do as he was bid.

Then dinner, made hideous by Mrs. Stetheril at her worst, and Haddon and Ashe banished summarily to their suite of rooms on the third floor. Even now Evelyn downstairs was reading aloud to her aunt who, the girl more than suspected, was not listening.

"Have you seen this?" asked Haddon.

He tossed a newspaper to the table in front of Ashe and stood watching. The something in Justin Haddon's character which had forced him upward from the status of a poor farmer's boy to his present position of lawyer sharing many of Rachel Stetheril's confidences, shone at that moment unhidden in Haddon's look. So far, at least, had he played the game of life his way, so far had he won. And now, whatever lay before him, he held the trump card.

But if he looked to see a sign of agitation in Ashe, then was he to be disappointed. Ashe, not with-

out imagination, could have come pretty close to telling what was in the paper before he unfolded it.

True the prominence of the article, the big boldness of the type, caused a flicker of surprise.

"Gee!" he said. "Who'd have thought they'd trot out their brass band this way . . . just for me!"

But as he read further, catching the salient statements through the wordiness of the story, he added

"The band isn't for me after all, is it? It's for Mrs. Stetheril and the Stetheril Diamond!"

"Lieutenant Ambrose of the San Francisco police," he read aloud, "who for some time has been seeking such evidence as would secure the conviction of the man known as Ladyfingers, promises an early arrest. He is convinced that the thief is in hiding either in Oakland or San Francisco. All possible avenues of escape are carefully guarded. It is expected that Mrs. Stetheril, whose fifty thousand dollar diamond was stolen, will offer a large reward for its return. . . . Here!" cried Ashe, looking up with the new interest in his eyes. "What's this? Didn't she get her diamond back?"

"You *are* a cool young devil," grunted Haddon. "But, look here, my friend. You can keep the diamond; I don't want, and Mrs. Stetheril won't need it. That's what you get out of this if you do what you're told to do. That and a chance to keep out of the penitentiary."

Ashe returned thoughtfully to his paper with pursed lips.

"The diamond's gone," he said at last, tossing the paper aside. "And I didn't get it. Who did?

By Jupiter," and he began laughing softly, "It's Ambrose!"

"Ambrose?" frowned Haddon. "What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you see?" cried the young fellow as though at a very rare thought. "Ambrose comes along to arrest me. I get the diamond into my fingers. Ambrose breaks into the game and half breaks my arm with the butt of his gun. The stone falls into the grass. I speed up my departure. The diamond still lies where it fell. There's all kind of confu ·on for a moment. Then Ambrose comes shooting after me . . . *shooting wild!* . . . and I get away . . . and the diamond's gone! Do you know, my dear Mr. Haddon, my beloved benefactor, that if I went back to the city by the morning train and called upon Lieutenant Ambrose, he'd lend me the money to buy a ticket East?"

"Why do you try to lie to me?" demanded Haddon sternly. "Do you think that I'd believe a thing like that? I, myself, saw you with the diamond in your hand."

"You can turn out my pockets and aim an X-ray at my tummy," grinned Ashe. "There's no fifty thousand dollars' worth of jewelry either upon my person or within it. Now, Ambrose, if you happen to know him quite well . . ."

"Is crooked enough to do anything," responded Haddon. "That I'll admit. And further, if you like, I'll tell you that I don't care a snap whether you got it or he got it or it's still lying back there in the grass."

"To be sure," murmured Ashe with a great air

of nonchalant unconcern, "it's only fifty thousand dollars! What's that?"

And then, looking up at Haddon with that frank young grin of his, he added lightly:

"Just the same, when a man turns up his nose at fifty thousand, he's got something big in sight. Personally, like you, I rather prefer the big stakes."

"Steele," said Haddon, "do you fully realize that by the turn of my hand I can put you in the penitentiary for a good long time?"

"Fully," answered Ashe. "Don't think me ungrateful. . . ."

"Naturally," went on Haddon evenly, "I couldn't anticipate this crazy interference of Mrs. Stetheril's. But, if you've got the brains I think you have, I can't see that her action is going to make any great difference. It is likely that as long as she keeps you here she'll want me on hand. But in case you should stay and I return to my own house . . . Well, then there are two things for you to remember."

"One being San Quentin?" suggested Ashe.

"One being that if you try to leave before I tell you to I have a telephone in my house. I can get the telegraph office, the railroad stations, the county sheriff, and San Francisco, all in about the time you could walk a mile. Is that clear?"

"Eminently."

"And the other thing is that I am, just as you suggested, playing for big, very big stakes. I need you in my game. When I'm through with you you can go. Free and with money in your pockets. Do you understand?"

"Enough to see that I've got to be good," returned Ashe. "I suppose that that's as far as your explanations go just now?"

"Yes," said Haddon with great finality in his tone. He took up from the table a thick, bulging envelope and turned to the door. "I am going down now for a word with Mrs. Stetheril. You," he added dryly, "may spend your time answering for yourself as best you can any questions you'd like to put to me."

"Not on your life, my dear fellow," Ashe retorted gaily. "I'm going to look at the moon and dream golden dreams."

Haddon went down to his appointment with Mrs. Stetheril. Ashe drew a great leather chair close to the open window and with his hands clasped behind his head sat leaning back comfortably and looking out across the sweep of fields.

"Is Life what a man makes it?" he asked himself. "Or is a man what Life makes him? Now, I wonder. . . ."

But his ponderings had little to do with Haddon or Haddon's possible schemes. Of these matters, Ashe would set himself to learn in the days to follow. Now, because obviously he had come to some sort of a turning point in his own life, he let his thoughts range backward and forward. In meditative review he passed over the life San Francisco had given him, the lean years of his early childhood, brightened only by his mother, the hard years of his earlier struggles, the fuller years of promise that had come more recently.

"I am what I am," he told himself thoughtfully,

"because my Life is making me. Just how much, after all, I wonder, do I have to say in the making of my Life?"

At last he came to see in the end of the matter a sort of compromise. He was a thief because of external circumstance. He was an expert in his profession because of intrinsic qualities. He was a gentleman from inherent instinct. . . . And in the moonlight outside, strolling through the gardens, was Evelyn Daly.

Ashe, watching her a little while, frowned. Then he laughed. And when Evelyn, lifting her face toward his window, raised a hand to adjust a big rose in her hair, Ashe found the picture she made quite perfect, and getting to his feet went downstairs.

CHAPTER XII

THE HEIRESS AND THE THIEF

INDISPUTABLY the primary function of the eye is vision. Yet it must be imagined that very early in the annals of human history the eye assumed the second function of interpreter between two individuals of different tongues. It has an eloquence which is denied to mere vocal utterance.

Evelyn's eyes, lifted fleetingly to Ashe's, both spoke and harkened for his greeting. They held his a brief moment, telling of warm friendliness. Then, swiftly, she dropped them shyly, her lashes sweeping her cheeks. The act was characteristic of the girl.

"You were just coming in?" asked Ashe. "It is early; it is a wonderful night. . . ."

Evelyn laughingly turned and went back with him out upon the moonlit porch.

"For just ten minutes," she acquiesced.

"But surely . . ." began Ashe.

"Or, if you make yourself very interesting, maybe eleven!" she amended, her eyes flashing up to meet his, then eluding them again, hiding under her lowered lids. "If you'll talk to me about something I am simply *dying* to know."

"I promise," he said lightly. They went down

the steps. "Whether I know anything about the subject or not; whether I'm to speak upon Eskimo morals or the mechanism of an aeroplane."

"Oh, but this is something you know all about." They turned down an inviting gravelled walk bordered with rosebushes. "It is the psychology of a thief."

In spite of him Ashe was startled. For a moment he did not speak. Seasoned in encounters, trained to accept the unexpected without a tremor, he none the less felt now a shock of surprise. To have Evelyn Daly say to him, quite as though she were mentioning some such thing as a rosebush casually passed, "Tell me about the psychology of a thief," set his mind leaping through the darkness encompassing it for elusive explanations.

He kept his eyes keenly speculative upon the girl's face.

"The psychology of a thief?" he asked in a moment. "Shall I seek to entertain with theory and speculation? Or will you insist upon definite information?"

"The real truth," she exclaimed. "I can theorize myself."

"And no doubt I am expected to know all about this very interesting matter?"

"Of course!" she told him. "Why not? If you were just a common policeman I'd expect you to be stupid about it. But being a man who is sufficiently interested in crime to become an amateur detective . . ."

Ashe's vastly amused laugh, in which there was a note of relief all unhidden, drew her eyes wonder-

ingly to him. For the instant he had actually forgotten that as Mr. Steele he had a legitimate right to lecture upon such as Robert Ashe.

"So," he said, "you would know about crime and criminals? Do you know, in a land like this, on a night like this, with a lady like you, Miss Daly, this seems a strange thing to talk about?"

Unconsciously he grouped her with this rarely beautiful country garden through which they loitered, with this perfect night of spring. Evelyn smiled.

"Why?" she asked. And then, "Tell me," she insisted. "I have read books; in all of them are men or women who commit crimes. I knew a servant once who stole some spoons. I have never known anyone who made a profession of wrong-doing. I have never, until I saw you, known a man who knew other men making a profession of wrong-doing. A girl raised as I have been, living as I have lived, sees only the surface of things, gets no glimpse of what lies under that surface. *You* have come in touch with real life, with powerful motives, with crises. And I am on fire with curiosity!"

"You give me a big field," smiled Ashe. "And rather vague instructions."

"Tell me," she said eagerly, "about this man they call Ladyfingers! Oh, I have read all the papers say. Is it true that he is young and as handsome as a Greek god? That he is fearless and wonderfully capable? That he has defied the police for years, being cleverer than they? That he is hardly more than a boy and is already steeped in crime? Have you ever seen him, talked with him?"

"Dear lady," answered Ashe quite gaily, "I have seen the monster, talked with him. As for the Greek god part of it, I dare say the papers are right. Let us say even handsomer than Vulcan though perhaps a trifle less godlike than Apollo. As for all of the other superlatives, I'd hazard the guess that he's entirely human."

"*Is* he a monster? *Is* he human? Which?"

"He is what you term a professional criminal," replied Ashe, looking at her curiously. "Doesn't that settle it?"

At first he had wondered how he might lead the talk into another channel; now he was quite as anxious to go on with it as was Evelyn. She wanted to look through his eyes upon the underworld of crime; he wanted suddenly to know how she felt toward such as Ladyfingers.

"Tell me," she commanded.

"Well, then," he began, "he strikes me as being utterly human. I'd say that he enjoys life much as you and I do. That he has a taste for good music, no less than for good things to eat and drink. That he'd enjoy a night like tonight, in such company as yours, even as I am enjoying it. That he has the soul to enjoy swimming in the surf, playing chess, reading Keats and Burns, and even the *Faerie Queen*. I have known him to read it. I'd say that he gets as much joy out of a rather hard nut safely cracked, as does your Aunt Rachel out of one of her big business deals properly driven to the satisfactory ending. That he has his moments of elation, his times of despondency although they are rare, his ambitions, and his own sort of ideals. In short that he

is quite human. . . . Even as you and I!" he ended with secret relish in the words.

"Go on!" cried the girl, all eager interest.

"I'd say," continued Ashe thoughtfully, "that this man Ladyfingers would have little compunction in breaking any law that a wise body of legal-minded men ever made; that he'd rob a safe or pick a pocket right merrily. That he wouldn't hurt a little child or an animal wilfully; that he'd give as gladly as he'd take; that he'd find a sort of pleasure in robbing a man or woman so terribly rich as your aunt; that his lifetime of wrong-doing has had in it some few, stray kind acts; that he has good impulses and bad; that, in short, he is quite a human being."

Evelyn's eyes were sparkling with interest.

"Why," she broke out impulsively, "you make a hero out of him! He must be splendid! Think of robbing a safe with a volume of poetry in his pocket!"

Ashe blushed. Strive as he might he could not keep a flood of blood from rushing into his face. He had been speaking of himself and of himself he had made Evelyn think as of a splendid hero! He felt suddenly as though she must know that he was speaking of himself, that she must look upon him as a man shamelessly boasting. He had wanted her to think of him . . . to think of Ladyfingers . . . as he actually was. And, knowing that she had heard and read the evil to be said of him, he had spoken too strongly of the other side.

"A hero? Hardly," he said swiftly. "Remember his attack on Mrs. Stetheril. . . ."

"And the man he shot," added Evelyn. "How could he do that . . . if as you say he is human like you and me? To shoot down a man merely standing by. . . . Of course the bullet was meant for one of the policemen. . . ."

"I don't believe," said Ashe, interrupting her, "that it was really Ladyfingers who fired that shot. If the man should die . . ."

"Oh, he won't die. Auntie had Mr. Graham telephone to the city for particulars. It was rather a slight wound after all. But, when this wonderful thief fired the shot he could not have known that he would not kill."

"And yet," he offered, "I have heard it said that Ladyfingers has never carried a gun; that he has said that if he couldn't get out of a tight place without shooting his way out he'd stay in it."

"Then," she asked, puzzled, "if he didn't do the shooting, who did?"

Ashe laughed.

"Before now," he told her, "an enthusiastic policeman, shooting in the dark, has been known to hit the wrong target!"

Together they went down the rose bordered walk, strolling slowly through the moonlight, Robert Ashe, Thief and Fugitive, with Evelyn Daly, the Heiress to Many Millions. Whether or not the Great Adventure was coming to him down the graveled paths of Mrs. Stetheril's gardens, Ashe did not yet know. He did know that he did not want Evelyn Daly to think of just the bad in Ladyfingers. He did know that now and then her skirt brushed against him, that her arm touched his sleeve, that as Mr. Steele,

Justin Haddon's secretary, she was quite ready to accept his companionship. He did know that Justin Haddon had merely to use a telephone to remove him both from Evelyn's side, and from the quiet peace of the moonlit gardens.

"If you feel so great an interest in such as this Ladyfingers," he suggested, "why haven't you asked Mr. Haddon for information? Surely he, being a lawyer . . ."

Evelyn laughed softly.

"He's just Justin," she answered. "Good old prosaic, matter of fact, hard working Justin. He wouldn't understand me; he'd think I'd gone mad. He'd perhaps be shocked at me, finding me unladylike. He'd say, 'Why, the man's a crook. You couldn't possibly have any interest in such as he.' Then he'd begin telling me something he'd call interesting, about mortgages and deeds and politics."

"But," and Ashe laughed with her, "he isn't quite as bad as that! And he'd know the two sides of a criminal; he should know them far better than I."

"But he doesn't," she announced positively. "He looks upon a criminal just exactly as Huxter, the head gardener, looks upon a potato bug. Something to crush for its menace, not to ponder over. He doesn't see the mystery and the romance of life." Her eyes lifted, held his a moment, were hidden under her lashes. "He's an honest, hard working man who sees everything in the world from the one point of view of honesty and hard work. From a poor farmer's boy he has made himself a lawyer,

known all over the county when he's only thirty-six. He couldn't have done that if he hadn't let himself become a machine." She hesitated briefly; then with sudden impetuosity she cried, "A plodding, prosaic machine!"

"I thought . . ." began Ashe, and stopped.

But Evelyn chose to let him know that she understood.

"I was just a little fool last summer when I came up here," she said swiftly. "And he is so earnest and stubborn about anything he wants . . ."

She broke off, whirled suddenly, and caught up her skirts.

"The ten minutes are up!" she laughed at him. "Good night, Mr. Steele!"

And she flashed away from him, racing through the moonlight, back to the house. As she ran a big white rose tumbled from her hair. Ashe stooped and caught it up.

"After all," he asked himself lightly, "why Haddon, the plodding crook, rather than Lady-fingers?"

And, as Evelyn, pausing breathless in the doorway, turned to wave good night, he lifted the rose to his lips, bowing over it as though it had been a lady's hand.

CHAPTER XIII

WITCH OR FAIRY GODMOTHER?

THERE are those who have held that life is a dream. Bobbie Ashe found it so. Now and then he held his breath, telling himself that he must not let his objective mind interfere with circumstance for fear that the dream be broken. True, he smiled at the fancy. But it came to him often and back of the smile was a half seriousness.

Days came and went, the buds of spring burst into full bloom, the promises of the pussywillows along the creek were fulfilled. The world of the outdoors was at its tenderest and man, when he lives close to the great mother, takes his mood from hers. Ashe's mental state was one of quiet delight.

He was still at the Big House, he and Justin Haddon and Evelyn Daly. Rachel Stetheril had commanded. Haddon had been upon the verge of objection. Rachel Stetheril had stabbed at the air with her stick, had ended the argument with her favorite, final words, and Haddon had been prompt to say,

"Why, of course, if you wish it . . ."

Evelyn and Ashe saw a very great deal of each other. That was obvious to Haddon who one night, in an angry mood, warned the boy to stop where

he was and not make any mistakes. It was clear to the old woman who said nothing but who watched the two with hard, bright eyes. It was clear to Evelyn who now had had ample time to answer her own question, "Do I really love Justin?" She confided in the Heiress that most positively she did not. Whereupon the Heiress admitted her suspicion that there was vastly less sentiment than business in Attorney Haddon's make-up and that whereas no doubt he loved her . . . As why indeed should he not? . . . still perhaps he loved her imminent millions more.

In Evelyn's bright eyes Bobbie Ashe dwelt in a gloriously rosy mist, the mist of Romance. He could scarcely have delighted her more had he stepped in cloak and plumed hat and clanking sword from the pages of "When Knighthood was in Flower." His graceful courtesy was like incense in her delicate nostrils. His attitude toward her, toward Mrs. Stetheril, was that of a respectful admirer toward a great lady. Evelyn had known only the smug young men of her set and found in Ashe's manner something refreshing and novel. It is pleasant to be waited upon by a good-looking young man who finds his own reward in the rendering of the service. It is pleasant to have one of your own age and apparent station treat you with respect. And perhaps still more pleasant when that respect, not lessening, is subtly tinged with both admiration and ardor.

There are in this good old fairy world of ours a certain number of beings like Evelyn Daly, who consider themselves rather as personages than mere

persons, who turning their eyes inward see there what they wish to see, who are highly satisfied with that vision, who while sanely realizing that utter perfection is impossible here below are comforted by the thought that any closer approach toward perfection could be attained only at the sacrifice of the existing charm of their little imperfection. If they wrote theses upon the matter . . . which thank Heaven they don't! . . . they would probably lead off with the statement which we are in no position to disprove: "The wings of an Angel are very becoming but one couldn't really look well in them and do her hair the latest way. Not to mention the other sacrifices they would cost." Which, of course, the theses would go on to mention at length. And, when you come right down to it, bare, white shoulders are quite as attractive.

When one considers himself as being secure in that desired position with regard to the final limit of perfection and the little charms of imperfection, he is quite likely to expect others to share in his clarity of vision. Evelyn Daly had had many young men tell her very interesting things about herself, views with which she could agree without being displeased, and by no means all of the young men had been unduly influenced in their view by the fact of her great-aunt's millions. Evelyn had grown to look upon those of her own age and opposite sex as being almost universally quite sensible and perspicacious. She had her doubts about those of the gentler and more discerning sex, and with no aim at a pun since she was never humorously inclined, believed that more often than not they were unfair.

In certain of her terrestrial moods she had announced to her bosom confidante that these beings were "Cats."

These days at the Big House she was very happy. She saw that Justin frowned when he came upon her and the amateur detective-secretary bending together over a book or lounging in the music room, and the frown gave her a thrill; a thrill a little terrible but delightful withal. The idea of Justin grown into a sinister, jealous, perhaps dangerous lover was not without its element of expectant pleasure. She saw that Ashe's eyes really brightened when he came upon her and suspected that an early admiration was being swept up into a warmer interest. Strolling alone in the garden while Rachel Stetheril was firing orders at both her lawyer and secretary, she saw Huxter, the head gardener, turn idolizing eyes upon her . . . even a number of paces away she could hear his great sigh across the rosebushes. True Huxter was only a gardener. But then a sigh is a sigh. And adoration, even from an uncouth Huxter, may be not unlike a pearl from an unlovely oyster.

So the days danced on in triumphant procession leading in the full blown springtime. Ashe was at home here now. He felt toward the old life in San Francisco as though it had been but a dream-prelude to this delightful existence. He came and went as it pleased him, always conscious that Haddon's eyes journeyed after him but in no way disturbed by them. He knew that Haddon never lost sight of him for more than a half day at a time, very seldom for so long. He knew that if he tried to slip

away Haddon would telephone to a dozen places and that the many arms of the law would reach out for him. He knew that Rachel Stetheril watched him often and keenly. But it didn't matter. He didn't intend to run away . . not so soon from so pleasant an existence . . . not until he knew just what Haddon's game was.

As Mrs. Stetheril's secretary he was kept very busy for many hours each day. He had always had his own opinion of people who accepted such slave driven tasks as this. But even this work didn't mar the joy of his "holiday." He typed letters, talked with people over the telephone lines, making appointments for his employer . . . and yet it was to him more than dull routine. He was seeing from a fresh viewpoint the workings of big interests.

To call for Long Distance and then get a financier whom he had in the old days upon his "list," had its amusing side to him. To send his own voice for hundreds of miles into a teeming city where even now the law was driving its hungry search after him was akin to adventure. He talked thus with Melvin Rausch, the president of a San Francisco fruit company and told Rausch exactly what he was to do upon a certain bit of company business. Rausch grumbled but at the magic words, "I am sorry, but Mrs. Stetheril insists," did as he was told. He wrote letters which said briefly, "You will do as I have said and do it immediately or take the consequences." And the letter, once that it was signed viciously, brought in due time the desired answer, excepting alone in the attempted coercion of Bond, the Lockworth cashier.

Yes, it was interesting to pause for a little upon his gay journey down the bright highway of life, to look in at the windows of such as Rachel Stetheril, to observe how the big deals in "legitimate" business were operated. It was worth while to stop and read this word, "legitimate," scrawled across all these big deals . . . and to smile at it! Rachel Stetheril had said to Mr. Bond, in just so many words, "You'll do as I tell you or I'll smash you! I'll break you so completely that you won't have enough pennies left to start in selling papers!" Ashe had always contented himself in taking what he thought he might need and did it unlawfully. She would take every cent, but in a highly respectable and legitimate fashion.

"Bond has just cleaned up a fortune in boom city real estate," Haddon reported early in the course of hostilities. "And in a couple of months he moves up from cashier to president, taking old Mr. Armstrong's place."

"So much the better!" Mrs. Stetheril had cackled. "So much the better! I hope he piles a million on top of that before I get ready to go after him. The higher the fool climbs the harder I'll dump him."

To be sure it struck the new secretary that it was a bit noteworthy that he had been taken without question into the confidence of his employer as much as he had . . . but then he shrugged his shoulders. There were too many questions to be answered to allow of his beginning here.

One day, out of a clear sky, Haddon surprised him by asking, "When is your birthday?"

And he had answered, saying, "The first of May."

Now, he didn't know that he had been born upon the first day of May, but he didn't know that he hadn't. Birthdays had been forgotten by him for many a year after his mother had died. But he liked the idea of setting apart a natal day, a day not to mark the passing of the years and the drawing ever closer to the end of things mundane, but rather as a time upon which to celebrate the glorious fact of having come into a highly satisfactory world. The first of May did as well as another day.

Afterward he had cause to wonder if Haddon told everything he could learn from him to Mrs. Stetheril. For the old woman, looking at him sharply while he was typing from his scrawled notes, demanded:

"So your birthday's the first of May, is it?"

He had smilingly assured her that it was. He saw that she was staring at him harder than usual, her brows bunched up in that ugly scowl of hers.

"Humph!" said Rachel Stetheril.

And then, rather because he enjoyed having her rail at him than for any other clear reason, he said

"I've always been in the habit of celebrating the occasion. Do you suppose you could give me the day off, Mrs. Stetheril?"

He said it pleasantly, quite as though realizing that he was asking a great favor but doing so with the equal realization that the person of whom he asked it was the most good-natured generous, thoughtful-of-others individual in the world. For an instant he wondered if the old woman was going to attack him bodily with her stick. Her eyes looked fairly murderous. And then . . . he suddenly knew

why . . he had the swift impression he had had before now, that the evil gleam was but summoned to mask a strange sort of kindliness.

"You young whipper-snapper!" she flung at him. "When do I ever take a day off because I've got a birthday, I'd like to know."

Ashe promptly forgot the trifling episode in the press of a hundred other matters to think about. But he remembered it again, and again he wondered at the dinner table the last day of April.

"Haddon," the old woman had said at dessert, "I want you to give me the entire morning tomorrow. I've sent for the food directors of the Lockworth Railroad, and we'll go over everything. Steere, you keep out of my sight. I don't want you sticking around and getting in my hair."

And thus his holiday was coming to him! Not handed to him with a bow, of course; rather hurled at him like a bone to a surly dog. Both dog and bone hustled out into the backyard.

That night Mrs. Stetheril commanded Evelyn to go to the piano and for Heaven's sake play something decent for once in her life. And then she chased Ashe and Haddon after her into the music room.

Ashe liked to smoke after dinner. Only when he had gone to the music room with Evelyn and Haddon did he miss his pipe. As Evelyn took her place at the piano he slipped away and ran up the two flights of stairs. At the head of the second flight he came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Stetheril, who was hurrying with her quick, nervous little steps down the long corridor.

"You . . . you!" she cried at him angrily. "What do you mean . . . Didn't I send you into the music room?"

"But surely," he smiled back at her, "you haven't any objection to me coming up after my pipe. I. . ."

"Your pipe!" she snapped him up. "Young man, if you dare spy on me . . ."

"But, Mrs. Stetheril," he said, mystified. "I haven't any wish to spy on you. Why on earth . . ."

"Don't be impudent!" she cut him short. "Get out of my way! And keep out of my way tomorrow. And mind you, mind you you keep your mouth shut about . . . about . . . "

Actually she was embarrassed! Rachel Stetheril embarrassed! She stood before him stammering . . . he was not sure that a flush of color, pink, pale color, had not crept up into the withered cheeks! She sought for words which eluded her, looking for all the world like a tongue-tied schoolgirl. Ashe stared, dumfounded.

"Oh, the devil!" she cried out suddenly, a strange, utterly false note in her quavering voice. "If you dare speak to me about . . . about anything in the world I'll drive you out of the house."

And she was gone down the stairs with never a backward look. Ashe, groping in a sort of mental fog, hurried on to his room. He went in and switched on the lights.

"She's been prying in my room or Haddon's," he muttered. "I wonder which? And what for?"

At first, so keenly was he looking for something to hint at a secret visit that he did not see the ob-

vious. When he did notice he stood and gasped at what he saw.

Fronting him was his little fireplace. Before it were drawn up table and easy chair. Here he had the habit of sitting at night, reading and smoking and thinking. Table and chair were as he had left them save that over the chair was thrown a new dressing gown, warm in soft texture and in color; that upon the hearth, warming, were a pair of slippers; that upon the table was a new jar of his own favorite tobacco; that a couple of pipes such as one could not buy in Lockworth flanked the tobacco jar; that half a dozen volumes fresh from the book store, volumes which he must have mentioned here at some time, stood quietly inviting!

"And she put them here! For my birthday! Rachel Stetheril put them here!"

It was incredible and yet it must be so! He stood looking at the array, at first smiling, ready to laugh softly. And then his thoughts shot backward. There had never been a birthday for him since his sixth when his mother had given him a little book with pictures and stories of the fairies, all that she could give him. Never a birthday since then when anyone in all the world had given him so much as a good wish for the year to come. The smile died, his eyes grew wistful. Into his heart crept a sweetness which almost called for tears. He no longer asked why Rachel Stetheril had done this thing for him. It was quite enough that she had.

"She's a God-blessed old humbug!" he told himself softly.

And instead of going back downstairs to laugh with Evelyn and vex Haddon, he tossed off his coat, slipped on the big dressing gown, drew on the slippers, and sinking deep into the easy chair filled a new pipe with fresh tobacco, took up a new book . . . and forgot either to read or smoke.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

A GIFT pipe in his teeth, a little volume in his pocket, Ashe struck out through the early morning toward the hills which lay along the eastern rim of the valley. The newly risen sun was a glorious thing, light-hearted like himself. The grass was dew-wet, and so at first he kept to the winding footpath along the winding creek. There was smoke climbing up from the chimney of old man Beeson's cottage and Ashe knew that Young Beeson was by now getting his own breakfast. The grass was tall and thick bordering the path; the grain fields promised a heavy yield when the summer sun should come; everywhere red and yellow and pale-blue wildflowers peeped through young wheat and barley and wild clover and oats. The little orchard beyond old man Beeson's was decked out in dainty, delicate blossoms. In the creek-willows were no end of bluebirds; Robin Redbreast was as gallant a fellow as of yore in his bright waistcoat, seeming really quite eager to lose his heart when occasion arose; larks, yellow-breasted music-makers, were everywhere.

In one pocket a sandwich, in another pocket a book, in his pipe fine, fragrant tobacco, in his heart the joy of life . . . verily no man better equipped

this morning for a journey through the fields and the wooded hills beyond than this young freebooter.

He followed the creek even after the sun began to drink up the dew from the grass. It suited his mood to wander this way, not to follow straight lanes with right-angled turns. He passed within a quarter of a mile of Lockworth, but kept on with no temptation coming to him to turn into the village for the May Day festival and frolic. He strode on, skirting blossoming orchards and bright flower gardens set about homely cottages, loitering now and then to watch a cow and calf or a flock of pigeons or a noisy, gobbling lot of turkeys or a train of waddling ducks going down to the ponds. Looking in at the open door of one prim, whitewashed shanty he saw a woman feverishly decking out her several children in their holiday best of white starched collars and unaccustomed coats. Now and then, from some gentle rise, he made out teams drawing down into the heart of the valley from the encircling hills. It was still early when he had come to the timber line toward which he had set his face, but already, looking back, he could see many vehicles and saddled horses tied upon the edge of the clump of oaks under which the countryside were meeting to picnic and dance and flirt and argue and watch the big chunks of beef revolve and sizzle and brown over the blazing coals of the trenches.

"I have had enough of people," was Ashe's hardly formulated thought. "Never enough of the woods."

Another dream had come true! High up in the foothills, among the oaks and pines, he had in de-

licious truth found two big, mossy boulders with a clear, cold stream of water gurgling out from between them! Valleywards the trees shut out Lockworth and gave him the grateful sense of being alone, gathered close to the heart of the woodlands. On either bank of the thin stream stood alders and willows, with wild blackberry vines twining among them.

He stood looking down at the clear make-believe fury of the hillside brook, a smile in his eyes, in his heart a feeling of comradeship for its struggles as in petty foaming fury it sought to break over its rock-edged channel. He wanted to prolong this moment. He got down upon his knees, scooped up water in his hands and, having no thirst, drank for the sheer pleasure of the drinking. He threw himself down upon his stomach, put his lips to the cool, racing surface, and drank, pleased with the coolness of the spray in his eyes, upon his face. And then, squatting there, he watched the way of the branches of a willow whipping at the water, jerking free of the flashing current, drawn under the next second, like a man dallying with a mood, never quite mastered, never quite its master. . . .

The sense of solitude was deep upon him. He realized that if anyone he knew in San Francisco, anyone he knew here in the country, were with him his day would be marred. For the first time he was tempted to defy Haddon, to break away, to penetrate deeper and deeper into the thicker forests further back upon the mountains, to drink his fill, having tasted sparingly, of solitude. That way he could go, yonder where the hills rose more ruggedly,

where the trees stood closer together, where the little grassy path invited. Further and further until night came, a night under the stars. Thus might one come to forget that he was a fugitive, remembering only that he was living in the way it was natural to live before nature was snared out of her leafy haunts.

It was sheer folly. He knew that. But he found his joy of the hour in choosing to close his ears to reason's voice. He pushed on, letting his fancies lead him, his head up, his lungs filled, his blood running riotously. And all the time he knew that he was not unlike the willow back there, that he was but playing with his mood, that in a few short hours he must turn and hasten back to the Big House, answering Haddon's tug at his chain like a good dog. He frowned. Why should Haddon throw a shadow over him on a day like this? Haddon and San Quentin . . . Damn them! They were made for each other. A strange little shiver shook him. San Quentin! A place where they shut men up in dark cells . . . There were woods like this and they were empty! There were prisons and they were filled. Never had a prison seemed to him so damnable. He saw how the sunlight pierced through the thick foliage of a live oak, how a rabbit bounced and dodged under a bush. Rabbits had less brains than men, yes, and far less folly . . .

Soon he forgot such sober-hued things. He went panting up a ridge, thickly timbered, and paused resting at the top. His coat was off, carried over his arm. The day was glorious. But the view he had expected from here was shut out by other hills,

by much timber. He went down a little slope at a run, keenly aware of a live body, glorying in the mere physical luxury of eager muscles in swift play. Of many crisscrossing stock trails he chose one at random. He crested other knolls, sped down other slopes, found new streams and at last, with a great sigh telling of tired muscles and contented soul, threw himself down in the shade of a tree.

He thought of poor little Pippa. Therefore of poor little Polly. For, a day like this in mind, he had quoted Pippa to Polly. Then of how like Pippa he was, himself. Boasting of his freedom, always reveling in his freedom, now scarcely less slave than Pippa. "But this one day I have leave to go, and play out my fancy's fullest games; I may fancy all day . . . and it shall be so."

In due course of time he found that he had a most marvelous appetite. His great thick sandwich disappeared as if by magic; a fallen crumb he picked up from the grass. He remembered a box of apples he had seen upon the kitchen table and regretted now that he had not taken one as he had come so near doing. Next time he would know that one sandwich, no matter how thick it may be, is not as good as two, or perhaps three, sandwiches . . . All thick, by the way . . .

He opened his pocket volume of lyrics and came to understand with something of a shock that reading musical lines about the woods is not half so much fun as lying upon your side and smoking your pipe and looking at the woods. Or even letting the pipe grow cold in the grass while you roll over on your back, clasp your hands behind your head, and

stare up at the patches of blue through the hardly stirring branches of an oak.

He had had the forethought not to bring a watch. No machine-driven hands of a slave-driving watch were going to dictate to him today. He'd do what he pleased when he felt like doing it. Consequently he ate his sandwich at about half past ten o'clock and by noon was as hungry as he had been before he had eaten it. Now he couldn't get out of his mind the cold ham and olives he had seen in the cook's cooler. By one o'clock he was homeward bound . . . or thought that he was. Ten minutes later he came without warning to the end of his path in a thicket of manzanita bushes. That puzzled him. He could have sworn that this was the same path that had led him here. He began to notice other paths carefully. He came to the conclusion that while they led in a score of directions they were all just alike in appearance. Then came the amusing realization that he didn't know north from south, that so far as he could tell Lockworth might lie at any point of the compass, that he had gotten himself tangled up mentally, turned about physically, and as a result that he was completely lost.

The sensation was entirely a pleasing one. He had wanted for a little to get away from the world. Now he didn't even know where that world was! Not lost himself; he had managed to lose the world! A very highly satisfactory consummation.

He sat on a log, kicked his heels against it, and enjoyed the situation. The sun was high, the day was bright and warm, and he was most delightfully lost. For once realization was better than antici-

pation; he had never dreamed of so eminently satisfactory a condition of things.

But later he grew a bit serious over it. Paths insisted upon ending nowhere. A bit of country which seemed from a little distance the familiar one through which he had come this morning, turned out to be new to him. When he passed through an open space, expecting to see the level valley from the next knoll, he looked upon other hillsides and oaks and pines and patches of brush. He climbed hill after hill trying to see out over the valley and saw still other hills and trees.

With the sense that one has lost his way in the woods, even though it brings with it no whisper of the element of danger, there comes quite naturally a stirring emotion which is not, and yet which resembles, the dawning of terror. Hence so simple a matter for one to grow feverish and even desperate, for him to run in a thousand directions, for him to spend his strength needlessly, for him to lose his presence of mind. While no such thing happened to Ashe, none the less he felt a vague uneasiness. In it was no fear of serious consequences, and yet subtly it changed the whole face of nature about him. No longer did he plunge into the woods with a sense of ownership; now the forest held him and was his master. Where he had, a little while ago, seen bigness and dignity he now sensed sternness. Solitude was twisted magically into lonesomeness. The stillness was less grateful, it bore heavily upon him.

Essentially cool thoughted he smiled both at his predicament and at himself. No doubt, even now, he was within shouting distance of some house,

within a stone's throw of the ragged edge of the forest. Why, a man couldn't lose himself for more than three or four hours here if he tried! If just he kept going straight on in any direction he'd get somewhere. And then, only then, a fresh thought came to him and he stopped, flashed a quick look up at the sun and stood staring down at the ground, frowning. Haddon again . . . and beyond Haddon a mighty good chance to see what the inside of a state prison looked like.

He had been away since early morning. If he did not get back before dark, report to his keeper, then Haddon would telephone to a dozen places, telling various officials of the law to look out for Ladyfingers, fugitive thief. To Haddon it would seem perfectly clear that Ashe had not come back because he was not coming back at all. And more than once had Haddon said in many ways, but always with a note of utter positiveness in his tone,

"Make a break for it and I'll land you in the penitentiary."

"It's get out of this quick," mused Ashe a little bitterly, "or have some hayseed sheriff take me in like a stray pup. A city boob like me that gets himself lost just out of sight of home wouldn't last long with a sheriff after him."

He walked on swiftly. Still was the sun high but long ago had it passed the zenith. He could form little idea how far he had come. He struck out in a direction which he hoped would eventually lead him to Lockworth and kept to it as steadily as he could. He must get back to the house before Haddon did anything. He couldn't understand just

how the lawyer was in a position to denounce him since it had been Haddon himself who had brought him into Mrs. Stetheril's home. But he was not playing Haddon's game now, but his own. Haddon no doubt had his explanation, Haddon was a lawyer who understood such matters.

So Ashe's hurried seeking for the way out of the woods became a matter of supreme importance. If he failed then he stood in a fair way to pay heavily for his failure, perhaps with many years of his life. In one of the nicely balanced scales of his destiny there trembled his joyous freedom; in the other his incarceration in a prison which today, more than ever, seemed to him utterly damnable. His quest became a game for immeasurably great stakes. A glow of excitement crept over him. And with it came the recurring knowledge that before him was set a problem which any plowman of the valley could have laughed at but which to him was harder than robbing a national bank.

Lower rolled the sun, seeming to his fancy to be dragging a palpable darkness closer, inch by inch. Once he stopped with the sudden strong conviction that his back, not his face, was set toward Lockworth. But again he went on stubbornly. There must be no retracing of steps. If he were going in the wrong direction, then he had better go as fast and as far as might be.

At last, unavoidably, there came to him the time when he had to set his brain hard against his emotions, fighting them down. In spite of him an excitement had gotten into his blood such as he had never known even in his skirmishes with the

law. In the city he had always had the assurance that he was a man and it was only men against whom he must strive, men and man-made institutions. But here he was pitting himself against the forest, a thing which was bigger and older and stronger and sterner than man. A thing which began to crush him, to mock him, to trick him by blind trails into the undoing of his own efforts. As an hour went by and another the sense of baffled hopelessness grew in him. It seemed to him that he was fighting against an iron thing so mighty that it sneered at his insignificance and had no need to fight back. It had only to wait, just as it had waited through the calm centuries. It had only to lie quiescent about him while he labored on, watching him, contemptuous of him. And still was he as powerless as though it were a great octopus with him in its many arms.

His heart was beating quickly. And he knew that it was less because of his hastening, less because of his thoughts of Haddon, than because of that strange dread which comes to a man from the mere fact of being lost. The very word spells despair. The emotion defies analysis. His forehead was wet.

A sudden little laugh thrilled through him. A laugh coming he knew not whence, seeming to partake of something of the sparkle and music of the brook he was crossing, to incorporate into itself something of the gay sunlight through which it came to him. Startled, he stared about him, turning this way and that. Again the sound of laughter floated

to him deliciously. In truth it was like music, bringing to him as it did the leaping hope of being no longer lost, like sunlight in that no longer did the woods wear their shadows like threats.

It was very silent again and he had seen nothing . . . excepting the picture in his imagination which the swift brush of his fancy had painted about a laugh. A girl couldn't laugh like that and not be at once pretty and bright eyed and tantalizing.

"Look here," he called, after a little. "This isn't fair! Come out of the tree trunk in which you're hiding, or up out of your favorite pool of water and let me see what sort of a wood Nymph you are."

For a space nothing but the singing of the brook and the sunlight lying warm over the world. And then, true enough, there she was just stepping out from the great blackened hollow of a giant oak, quite as his fancy had painted her, merry grey eyes, laughing red mouth, tumbled but bewilderingly attractive brown hair.

"It was so funny," she informed him gaily. "You were lost . . ."

"And you've been watching me?" he reproached her. "While I've been racing madly . . ."

"Is it an Indian, Big Sister?" came a thin, excited voice from the hollow tree. "A . . . a nice Indian?"

"Come out and see, Ronnie," the Big Sister laughed in answer. "And don't shoot him. For I rather think he must be a nice Indian."

Ronnie came forth little by little, reconnoitering. His eyes were wide with interest and bright with eagerness. Behind him in a chubby and very dirty

hand he trailed a very excellent gun fashioned from a redwood board, while to make his warlike nature the more marked a feather from a bluebird's wing was stuck into a string tied about his curly head.

Ashe transferred his friendly grin from this three-year-old cherub masquerading as a human little boy and to the Big Sister. Big? If there was any word in the dictionary which didn't belong to her it was this one which Ronnie had bestowed upon her from the depths of his adoration. There was nothing big about her, unless it were her eyes. . . .

"Hello," offered Ronnie, visibly swelling up and taking on a swagger befitting the occasion, his eyes the while filled with his curiosity. His little voice he sought to make into a big voice such as one man may use with another.

"Hello," Ashe returned the greeting. "You're an Indian hunter, I take it? Or rather," hastily, remembering the bluebird feather, "an Indian chief?"

"I'm Jack the Giant Killer," Ronnie informed him with equal gravity. "But I shoot bad Indians too. Don't I, Enid?"

"Enid is better than Big Sister!" thought Ashe quickly.

"Yes, Ronnie," the girl answered, her hand upon the fair curls as Ronnie nestled against her skirt. And to Ashe, seeking to make her amused eyes grave as befitted the occasion, "If you really are lost I can show you. . . ."

"Oh, I don't mind your laughing at me," said Ashe good-humoredly. "I'm just a fool of a city man who ought to be laughed at. I expect Ronnie

here would be ashamed of himself if he didn't know more about the woods than I do. Wouldn't you, Ronnie?"

"How one can really lose his way in the woods," smiled the girl, "has always been a mystery to me. Where there are landmarks everywhere . . ."

"It's the easiest thing in the world," Ashe assured her quite emphatically. "Landmarks everywhere! That's just the trouble. They're everywhere and they're all just alike. Trees just the same, rocks just the same, springs just the same. Whew! I'm glad you found me!"

She nodded understandingly.

"You feel here just as I felt once when I was a little girl and went to Los Angeles with mamma. If I were dropped down now in the middle of a big city somewhere I suppose I'd be frantic . . . as frantic," she assured him brightly, "as you looked a minute ago tearing along through the brush! You looked *so* troubled."

"Troubled," he repeated dryly. "I guess I was." He looked up at the sun again, remembering Haddon. A moment ago the sun had been running a race with him. Now it seemed to have admitted itself beaten and to have stopped to rest, still high up in the sky. "You see," he explained, "I have a rather important engagement and I was afraid that I was going to be late."

"Were you afraid?" asked Ronnie curiously, catching at the word. "And did me and Enid come and save you?"

"You most certainly did, young Giant Killer," said Ashe heartily.

"Were you scared of bears?" Ronnie wanted to know.

"Not of bears," Ashe told him with great seriousness. "Just of being too late to see a man I must see."

"Oh," said Ronnie. But a little troubled look was in his wide eyes. He lifted them questioningly to his sister. "Is . . . is he a bad man?" he demanded in a stage whisper. "Does he tell lies and steal and be bad?"

"Ronnie!" chided Enid. "You mustn't talk like that."

"Then why was he *scared?*" insisted Ronnie. "If you are good you don't have to be scared at all!"

Ashe's eyes met the little fellow's merrily and frankly and were quite clear. To his brows came no hint of a frown. But it seemed to him that the shade of a shadow had flashed fleetingly through his heart. He did not know why, but he realized dimly that it was less pleasant to have a pair of baby eyes turned upon him that way with a pair of baby lips asking, "Does he tell lies and steal and be bad?" than to have the same question put to him in other words and looks from the lips and eyes of a police officer.

"Ronnie and I just ran away for an afternoon in the woods," the girl was saying. "We're going to have our little picnic here. Do you care to join us for a sandwich? Then we'll show you the way back to Lockworth. Or must you hurry to your engagement?"

"Look," cried Ronnie, running back toward the

hollow tree to show the way. "There's our picnic. It's all ready."

"If I may just sit and rest and smoke my pipe while you eat?" Ashe asked.

Ronnie was already squatting eagerly over their "picnic," consisting of a few sandwiches, a couple of apples, a piece of cake spread out upon a newspaper. Enid was smiling at him, looking no less happy than he. Ashe turned his eyes toward her. She lifted her hands to her tumbled hair. He wished she'd let it alone. It was wonderfully becoming that way. Why should only Ronnie see her at her prettiest? But it was wonderful any way she fixed it, caught up and piled high upon her head. So was her throat wonderful, white and round, looking soft and warm. So was the fresh cool tint of her cheeks. So were the dimples which Ronnie's huge delight and enthusiastic antics brought into being. So . . .

Then she turned her eyes swiftly upon Ashe. The thing in his eyes must have been easy to read. A quick flush ran up into her cheeks.

"Yes, I'll just rest and smoke while you eat," he repeated.

And even then he noted how unlike Evelyn Daly she was; how, with the warm color in her cheeks, she did not drop her eyes but held them quite steadily upon his. It came to him like an inspiration that it is the way of boldness to affect timidity, the way of shyness to seek to be fearless. As to which he liked better, eyes hiding swiftly under lowered lashes or eyes which met his bravely . . .

But Ronnie was calling imperiously.

CHAPTER XV

KARMA

"THAT," announced Ronnie sleepily. "That is a bad man! *I* know." . . . The lunch was gone, a golden half hour with it, and Ronnie's fat little forefinger indicated the picture of Senator George in the newspaper which a moment ago had been a tablecloth. . . .

Enid laughed at him. But Ashe, where he lay upon the grass, rolled over and remarked,

"I thought that he was supposed to be a good man, Ronnie. We have sent him to the senate with the idea . . ."

"Is the senate the place where they put bad men?" asked Ronnie.

"It's where some bad men put themselves," chuckled Ashe.

"Then I don't mean senate," said Ronnie, his head drooping until it rested upon his Big Sister's knee. "I mean penate, I guess. Don't I, Enid?"

"You mean penitentiary, Ronnie," she told him. "And I mean that the little Indian Sand Man is coming this way through the bushes."

"Pen-e-ten-try!" said Ronnie drowsily. He made hard work of it, but got out the last syllable with sleepy triumph. "Colonel Bullock calls it a pen, don't he, Enid? Is that kind of a pen like a pig pen, Enid?"

And without waiting for an answer, his chubby

little body relaxing with a sigh, he hied to his tryst with the little Indian Sand Man.

"How does it happen," Ashe asked quietly, "that he is interested in such things?"

"A little boy Ronnie's age is interested in everything in the world."

"But to brand the poor old senator as a bad man, to hint at state's prison for him . . ."

"Is just Ronnie's way of mixing things. He heard me reading something from the paper to mamma; he saw this picture and supposed that this was the man I was reading about."

"Whom were you reading about?" he asked quickly.

"A man named Robert Ashe. They call him Ladyfingers. You have heard about the attempt at robbing Mrs. Stetheril? She is . . ."

"I am her secretary," he answered in the voice which it had been his business to make steady upon occasions like this. "Yes, I have read of it."

"Oh!" She looked at him curiously. "So you are Mr. Steele?"

"Yes. I should have given you my name before now, shouldn't I? But somehow . . . I suppose it's because they're so new to me, the woods seem to me to make any sort of an introduction idiotic. It seems as if, out here, it didn't matter *who* a man was, just *what* he was. . . ."

"That's equally true anywhere, isn't it? When you come right down to it."

"It ought to be."

He picked up his pipe, filled it again, his eyes on Ronnie while he lighted it.

"Tell me," he asked abruptly, without pausing to seek a reason for the question, "what do you make of this Ladyfingers?"

Again she looked at him curiously. He met her clear eyes smilingly, frankly as was his way.

"Why," she answered. "He is a thief, isn't he? What could I make of him but just that? What he has made of himself. What Ronnie calls a bad man," she ended smiling.

But that didn't satisfy him. Suddenly he wanted her opinion of Ladyfingers. It was important that he should have it. Not merely because she was the daintiest flower of a girl he had ever seen, not that the physical charm of her, the glowing loveliness, made her opinion more to be desired than that of a less radiant sister, but rather because of an emotion which he could not quite have snared into words. It was perhaps a little because this girl was so antipodally set apart in her life and in her soul's life from the sort of thing which had grown to be a part of Ladyfingers, the debonair thief, that he desired her judgment.

"He is all bad, I suppose?" he asked carelessly.

She did not answer, but seemed to have grown a bit thoughtful.

"When we read a newspaper account of such a man," he went on, stubborn in his determination, "I wonder if we remember or forget that he is perhaps after all . . . human?"

Her thoughtfulness had deepened. Her hand lay very still upon the sleeping baby's curls.

"I think that I remember," she answered slowly. "Because . . ."

"Because?" he prompted her.

"Because of Ronnie!"

"Ronnie?" What could Ronnie have to do with Ladyfingers?

She nodded gravely. He marveled at the softness of her eyes.

"I am almost Ronnie's mother," she explained. "You see, mamma is not at all strong. Ronnie comes to me for almost everything. And sometimes I have wondered what would happen to him, into what sort of a man he should grow some day if he hadn't anyone to watch him grow up. If by any horrible chance he were left alone in a big city . . . upon the streets. . . . Just as little Robert Ashe was."

Ashe was startled.

"You seem to know all about him," he said quickly.

"Only a little. Only what I have read in the papers. His name has been in them more than once. His mother died when he was five or six years old. It seems that he is hardly more than a boy now. It is just pitiful. And so, if you want to know what I think about Ladyfingers, it is just that he has not been strong enough to be straight when it was so easy to be crooked. And that I am sorry for him."

"Sorry for him?" laughed Ashe. "He seems to be getting away with the game all right."

She shook her head again, a great look of wisdom in the young eyes.

"You can't get away with a thing like that," she said. "That's a law that men didn't make. I think you've got to pay, sooner or later. I was

reading a book the other day that made me think. It said that he who sins must pay. I think that is true."

"The prison . . ." he began. But she interrupted.

"I don't mean that. I mean that God makes you pay . . . or nature. If you eat things that are not good for you, you get sick. That's paying for it. . . . Poor Robert Ashe will have to pay some day for what he has done."

"I wonder how?" mused Ashe.

"If he loves his freedom, maybe by being shut up in a jail. If he wants to live straight when it is too late, maybe by finding that it *is* too late. If he has a friend, maybe by bringing suffering to him. If he should love someone very much or someone love him very much, by making that someone very sad. Maybe just by spoiling his own life; maybe, if he is not all bad, by spoiling the lives of other people."

"I have the idea," he said then, "that he plays a lone hand in the game of life."

"But he can't! Everyone has someone to care about him, even if he is no older than Ronnie here, even if he knows only a handful of people."

She spoke with simple positiveness. It is the boys and girls of the world who theorize upon the main springs of life, who coolly attack the big issues, who dare say, "This is so, That is not so!" who struggle with matters as large and unanswerable as Eternity, who generalize, and who, often enough, see the naked truth clearly. So Enid, younger even than Ashe who was but twenty-one, spoke now.

"If you should come to know a man like Lady-fingers," Ashe mused aloud, "I wonder how you would feel toward him?"

"I think it would just make me want to cry!" she dimpled at him.

"Why?"

"Just because I'd be so sorry for him. Sorry because he hadn't had a chance; sorry because he'd spoiled things; sorry because in the end he'd have to pay, oh so heavily! sorry because he was the sort of man no one could put faith in."

And that . . . hurt!

Ashe laughed and Enid turned to him with her former curious look. But, somewhere within him, there where a shadow had touched a little while ago, he winced. For in all of his life he had never broken faith with man, woman, or child.

"You see," she summed it all up, "he's making a terrible mess of everything. That is if he *is* human. And of course some day he'll be sorry. Suppose that he should grow to be a man of thirty and that he should never have been caught. Suppose, then, that he had his family; that he had a little boy, like Ronnie here. And that then he was arrested. . . ."

They talked of many things during the hour through which the tired Ronnie slept. The girl had accepted his presence as naturally as that of a chipmunk that came curious-eyed quite close to her. There was no cold, artificially built, conventional hedge between them. She was sunny hearted, quite ready to be friendly. There was no restraint, there seemed no need of restraint. It was with them

quite as though they two and the sleeping Ronnie were alone upon a delightful island.

They talked and they grew silent, naturally. They watched the birds coming to drink and bathe in the quiet pools, they listened to the laughter-filled bicker of the brook. And without knowing it, they came to stand, each of them, at the threshold of the other's inner self. The spell of the forest was over them. And over Ashe the spell of a girl, the rare, sweet, tender spell of a girl.

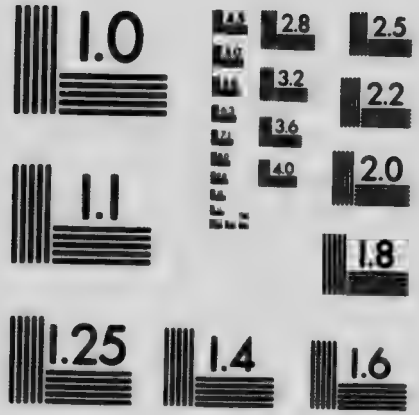
He told her of life in the city, its prettier aspects; of comedies and operas, of things she had never seen. She told him in little fragments which later he was to patch together, of herself. She was Enid Camden. There was just her invalid mother, Ronnie, and herself. Her father had died before Ronnie came. Through the kindness of Mr. Bond, the Lockworth cashier, it had been possible for her to go through high school. She had taken the county examination for teachers. She hoped to get a little school near home next term.

Quietly told, it was rather a pitiful little story. Ashe gathered that the farm was mortgaged. He thought longingly of the five thousand dollars at the Mission Street pier. . . . From under the wide brim of her straw hat Enid looked out at him brightly. She had told her story simply, not seeking to invest it with unnecessary gloom. Rather had she spoken with the quiet faith of young optimism. She looked forward to the time when she could be teaching; when she could pay off the mortgage; when she could give her mother and Ronnie the "things" which they wanted. She had known her

share of sadness; that was a bit of life just as the shadows upon the grass were a part of spring and summer time. But life itself was bright. . . .

From his worn volume of lyrics Ashe read to her. They caught the same music in the same lines; they found the same eager pleasure in the same word-woven pictures; and he read them over. They talked of books of which he had read more than a little, she only to the limited extent of the Lockworth school libraries. He told her of a book which she had not read; he promised to lend it to her and saw her eyes brighten expectantly.

Their meeting was a simple little event and simply they accepted it. Their hour under the trees together was a natural thing, and it made no flurry in either breast. Already they were quite ready to accept each other in the most matter-of-fact way in the world, to feel friendly toward each other. Beyond that fact there was no more reason that they should seek to look than beyond any other single occurrence of their lives. Just a boy and a girl in the forest lands, with a sleeping baby brother cuddled up at the girl's knee. And to them, coming down the world, that which must come, soon or late, to all boys and girls. The natural event coming naturally. . . .



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

CHAPTER XVI

WHITE ROSES AND A THEFT

SHY eyes which did not droop. Dawn-grey eyes bright with smiles. Eyes like no other eyes in all of the world. Eyes rather like little woodland flowers. Eyes so sweet that they haunted a man, sleeping or waking. The grave eyes of innocence; the soft eyes of girlhood; the tender eyes of Enid. . . .

"For the land's sake!" snapped the old woman sharply. "What ails the man! Are you deaf this morning?"

Ashe flushed and attacked the typewriter furiously.

"I . . . I was thinking . . ."

"Thinking, my foot!" she retorted, eyeing him suspiciously. "Did you go and get drunk yesterday just because it was your birthday? Have I got to say every word ten times before you can write it down?"

Under her piercing look Ashe's flush mounted higher.

"I beg pardon, Mrs. Stetheril," he said. "I'm afraid I am a bit absent-minded this morning. You were saying . . ."

"Absent-minded? You're a perfect fool this morning."

"The last word . . ."

"Was *Sir*," she informed him maliciously. "The first word was *Dear*. We'd just gotten that far. *Dear Sir*. A humbug is what he really is and a low down dog, to boot. But we'll call him *Dear Sir*. Have you got that?" she ended sarcastically.

Last night he had stood long at his open window, looking away across the starlit fields toward a little cottage in an old-fashioned countryside garden. He had pictured her not as he had first seen her, not as he had left her, but standing as he stood, at her own bedroom window, looking out across the fields. His thoughts had been all of her. The fancy was no less true than the fact. Her thoughts had been filled by him. It may be that across the miles their souls had talked.

"Have you collected all the Bond correspondence to date?" asked Mrs. Stetheril.

"Yes. I have it here."

He laid his hand upon the letters and notes, looking up at her brightly. He wanted to tell her how he had enjoyed his day, what her gifts had meant to him . . . and he knew that this way he would only anger her. So the best he could do was to let a corner of one of his new books stick out of his pocket and let her see him smoking his new pipe about the grounds.

"Go over the whole case for me," she directed tartly. "From the beginning to right now."

"You want me to read you the . . ."

"Read nothing! Tell me. Outline the case, showing just what steps have been taken."

He wasn't at all certain why she demanded this;

he knew that she had every point at the tip of her acetic tongue for he had heard her talk with Bond; he had the suspicion that she wanted to see if he was a fool or had a spark of intelligence. He kept his eyes upon her, not once referring to the orderly papers which he had brought from her safe.

"Last fall," he began then, speaking quite as though he were reciting a lesson to an exacting teacher, "you became for the first time interested in olive growing. That was in September. You immediately wrote to Washington and to Sacramento for government reports. You took up the matter with a dozen soil experts. Encouraged by what you learned you brought an olive expert into the valley. That was in October. Before he had gone out again you had sent for a second expert. From the reports of both you decided to plant olive trees along the western edge of the valley. You had Haddon look up the property there and learned that the land you wanted, a thousand acres, belonged to five men, each holding a hundred and sixty acres, and to half a dozen small owners. You had Haddon offer forty dollars an acre for the thousand acres. Haddon brought back the report that Arnold Bond had evidently learned that you were interested, that he had been before you, that he had taken options, and that he was asking fifty dollars an acre for the same land."

"What he was doing," she supplemented dryly, "was trying to beat me out of ten thousand dollars! Me! Go on."

"You took into your own hands the negotiations with Bond in December. Your letter," and he

grinned at her, "was brief and to the point. You offered him forty dollars an acre and assured him that you would never pay a cent more. Bond's answer was rather long in coming, a couple of weeks. . . ."

"During which he was doing some mighty hard thinking! He's a fool, that Arnold Bond."

"And when it came said that he regretted to inform you that the price of olive lands had gone up in the meantime. And that you'd have to pay him sixty dollars the acre if you wanted to buy."

"Sixty dollars, was it? I was thinking it was fifty-five. The *dirty . . . little . . . bloodsucker!*"

"He hasn't got any blood yet," laughed Ashe. "Your letter in answer informs Mr. Bond that he has been misinformed and that the price of olive lands has suddenly fallen to thirty dollars an acre. That was at the end of December. There was no answer to that letter. I have a note here, however, in Graham's handwriting, saying that Bond went ahead and gathered in his options of the five quarter sections, buying at an average a little below twenty-five dollars. Also that he was still holding an option upon the smaller places."

"Twenty-five dollars an acre," meditated the old woman, her chin at rest upon her hands clasped about the knobby end of her stick. "Twenty-five thousand dollars in all. Hm. Well?" sharply. "What next?"

"Your letter of January 10, calling to Mr. Bond's attention the fact that olive lands were still depreciating in value and that you now offered twenty dollars an acre. No answer again."

"Well, what next?"

"I find no letters after that. So far as I know the next attempt at negotiation was when you had Mr. Bond here last month. I believe that at that time you accused him of sharp business; that he said that he had studied your past successful methods with great interest and . . ."

"That will do," she cut him short. "Take a letter."

"*Dear Mr. Bond,*" said the letter. "*Concerning the lands upon the west rim of the valley about which we have spoken before: It gives me great pleasure to inform you that I have decided to take them over. I will pay you ten dollars an acre for them. Not one cent more now or later. Respectfully,* . . ."

"Ten dollars?" asked Ashe, curiously.

"Ten dollars," she snapped. "Call him up. Yes, right now."

Getting Bond on the telephone Ashe said:

"This is Mr. Steele, Mrs. Stetheril's secretary. Just a moment. . . ."

"Tell him," she said quickly, "that I am making him my final offer by letter today. Tell him that I mean business. If he doesn't accept it exactly as I make it and inside of twenty-four hours, I'm going after him. I'll smash him if it costs me a million! I'll put him where he'll be glad to get a job working in my garden! Drat the man. I hate a fool!"

"Mrs. Stetheril wishes me to say," said Ashe gravely into the transmitter, "that she is now mailing you her final offer for those olive lands. That she gives you twenty-four hours to accept that offer just as it is made. That if you fail to accept in

that time she is going to smash you if it costs a million; that she'll put you where you'll be glad to get a job working in her garden. That's all, I believe."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Stetheril not unkindly. "If Haddon or that idiot Graham had been giving that message they'd have spoiled it getting it into twice as many words. Take a tip from me, young man, and when you want a thing go after it the shortest way. And," sharply again, "don't ever bite off a chunk too big for you like Bond's trying to do. You watch the way I handle him and you'll learn something. Just because I'm an old, quarrelsome woman don't you think for a minute I can't show you anything. There's a chance for a young man, if he's got brains and . . . Oh, it's you, is it?" She whirled about in her chair, glaring at the intruder. It was Haddon, entering quietly. "What are you snooping around for? If there is one thing in the world I can't tolerate it's a snooper! What do you want?"

Since early morning Ashe, in spite of his pronounced preoccupation, had been vaguely aware of the change in Haddon. The man for a week had been restive, irritable, keeping much to himself like one who has something heavy upon his mind. No great masquerader, his eyes showed his restlessness. Now he answered quickly and a little more sharply than was his way with his employer.

"I beg pardon. . . . I didn't know that there was anything private . . ."

Rachel Stetheril thumped her stick in staccato savageness upon the floor.

"Burn the man!" she cried hotly. "Snooping and suspicious . . . Haddon, I've got half a mind to chuck you outdoors."

Haddon flushed and tightened his lips. They looked unusually pallid and thin today. As he could think of nothing to say which was pertinent and at the same time not impertinent, he turned and went to the window.

"Now sulk!" she grunted viciously and yet a bit triumphantly. "Snoop first and sulk next! Burn the man!"

She got to her feet and came over to Ashe's table.

"What are you sitting there grinning about?" she demanded. "Get your letters together and get out. I want to talk with Haddon."

Ashe turned back to his machine and began a hurried addressing of envelopes, his head down so that she might not see the smile which he could not quite banish. She whirled again upon Haddon.

"Haddon," she said sourly, "go get those papers on the Bromley matter. They're in the safe. We'll wind that thing up."

Haddon bowed and left the room. Ashe, the last envelope addressed, got to his feet.

"This is all, Mrs. Stetheril?" he asked.

"That's all." Then, Haddon being out in the hall, she came close to Ashe and fairly astounded him by saying in a quick whisper:

"Don't tell everything you know to Haddon. He knows enough things already. Just you keep your mouth shut . . . about everything."

And, his astonishment growing to stupefaction, the amazing old woman winked at him!

Going out upon the porch, the letters in his hand, Ashe came upon Evelyn Daly curled up in her lounge chair, busier with a sunshade keeping the sun off of her nose than with the book she had brought out with her.

"You look as if you were trying to work out a riddle," she laughed at him.

He dropped the letters into their box and came to where she lay.

"I was," he answered lightly, though his thoughts were still with Rachel. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Do you want very much?" she teased, her mood playful, her thought to have him say that he did and then inform him that he was smoking a great deal too much lately . . . which he wasn't . . . and to use her sweet power over him.

"Why, no," he confessed. "Not particularly."

He had come to her side, had glanced at her and her book and her sunshade. Now his eyes went away across the fields toward a certain tidy cottage in an old-fashioned flower garden. So he missed both the quick flirt of her eyes and the tiny frown thereafter.

"You are not very communicative today, are you?" she said gently, upon a new tack.

"Am I not?" he answered, smiling down at her but looking away again before it was strictly necessary. "I feel quite normal."

"Aunt Rachel is working you too hard," she said with impulsive sympathy. "She can be simply . . . horrid."

"Oh, I don't know," he chuckled, remembering the joy he had drawn from that lady's recent recep-

tion of Attorney Haddon. "She's just great! I'll bet that with all the fun she has scaring people she's simply dying to laugh half the time."

"Hm," said Evelyn.

Ashe stood there staring away into the distance. One hand was in his pocket, the other held the new pipe.

"Aren't you going to smoke?" asked Evelyn.

Again a little frown came to her placid brows. He had actually started as though he had forgotten her presence.

"I forgot," he said, filling the pipe.

"You are just about as entertaining company as the tomb this morning," she told him petulantly. "And last night you were just the same. You remind me of a parrot we used to have."

"Yes?" said Ashe. "That sounds interesting. What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything!" she announced triumphantly.

He laughed. Then, busied with the lighting of his pipe, he again stared away into vacancy. This time he was thinking of Rachel Stetheril. He'd like to know what the old woman was up to. . . .

"Isn't this pretty?" asked Evelyn.

"This" was a big white rose in full flower which lay upon her knee. She held it up for his inspection, looking at him brightly, keenly searching for an answering look of interest.

"Yes. Very. I never saw prettier roses than your aunt has here."

"I have gotten into the habit," probed Evelyn further, "of wearing this kind of rose. . . ."

Ashe looked merely politely interested. Seeing that she had paused he waited for her to go on. Evelyn's eyes held to his a little longer than was customary this time. But in the end they fell and without having found what they sought.

"I found a great bunch of them waiting for me the first morning after I came," she murmured archly. "I wonder . . . who could have sent them?"

"Your aunt, perhaps?" he suggested.

". . . untie give anyone flowers!" she exclaimed scornfully. "Can you imagine Rachel Stetheril with that much sentiment in her whole matter-of-fact make-up? I can't!"

He thought of dressing gown and slippers, of pipe and tobacco and books. Evelyn, stealing a quick look at him, admitted to herself that if he had put the flowers on the hall table for her he was concealing the fact wonderfully. But if not he, who then?

Ashe smoked his pipe in a sober silence. Evelyn after two or three quick glances at him fell to plucking the flower apart, petal by petal, wondering. Each morning Browdy would say, "I found these on the table, Miss." And each day Evelyn wore a flower for the mysterious donor.

"I . . . I think I'll run upstairs a little before Mrs. Stetheril wants me again," said Ashe abruptly. "I've got a letter to write myself."

So he had. An important letter. He must order a book which he had promised to Enid Camden.

Evelyn turned up her nose after the departing back of Robert Ashe. What was he after all, she demanded of the Heiress, but her aunt's hireling, and

an upstart to boot? True, admitted the Heiress, but with a little sigh, a trifle wistful. For he was also an amateur detective, a man who, had he seen fit, might have dabbled in most entrancing criminal adventures. But the chief fact demanding consideration now was the question of the roses. He, positively, had not sent them. Then . . . could it be Justin after all? Was there hidden under the surface of the man a vein of sentiment? Had Evelyn uncovered it? She was suddenly, and for the first time in many days, eager to see Haddon.

In a little he came out to her, his face flushed from a spirited session with the old woman. He, too, seemed abstracted. For a moment he was all unconscious of the nearness of Evelyn. He stood plucking at his lip, frowning. She studied him interestedly. She was pleased to invest him then with a ruggedness of character slightly more rugged than it really was; with a strength which in fact he just missed having; one couldn't build of him a debonair hero such as Mr. Steele might become to the mind of an impressionable young woman. But as a hero of another type, purposeful, single thoughted, masterful . . . yes, there were possibilities. Evelyn grew rather more languid looking, arranged a fair curl and her ankles nicely, and saved intact what remained of the big white rose.

"You look so cross, Justin," she said softly. "Are you?"

Haddon started . . . quite like Mr. Steele in that, she noted curiously.

"I have just had a little business talk with your aunt," he told her, coming down the porch. "Business is sometimes . . ."

"It always is, when it's with Auntie!" she laughed understandingly. She raised the rose so that it brushed her cheek . . . the more presentable side of the flower toward him. He didn't appear to have noticed it. His eyes held hers a moment, then went away moodily across the gardens.

Now, Haddon had always been most attentive in his way, a rather clumsy way which Evelyn now chose to name "masterful." He had never once been so rude as to think of something else when he was with her.

"Your aunt," he admitted slowly, "is . . . your aunt."

She brushed the rose against her lips, looking up at him invitingly. He gave no sign of having seen either flower or look.

"It has always surprised me," she said dreamily, "that a woman so dreadfully businesslike as Auntie should take such trouble to have the prettiest flowers in the world. Don't you think her roses quite too beautiful?"

"I dare say that they are," he admitted quite without enthusiasm. "I hadn't particularly noticed."

Now Evelyn was quite in the mood, in order to vex Mr. Steele, to throw herself into the arms, figuratively speaking of course, of Mr. Haddon. Never more so. Her emotion was a rare composite of annoyance and tenderness. But, unfortunately for his own plans, Haddon's "ruggedness" was unusually marked this morning. His eyes were restless and a

little anxious. They were neither appealing nor passionate nor even commanding.

"I . . . I've got to have a talk with Steele," he said abruptly.

And this time there was no "more presentable" side left of the offending flower.

Evelyn took up her book with a serenity of expression which was not the exact reflection of her feelings. Haddon went. Behind him remained an atmosphere which at first irritated the girl. He hadn't responded to her; it was the first time that he had not responded. His mind was elsewhere.

But Evelyn's irritation passed like the swift shadow of a scudding swallow. Her disposition was bright; worries made wrinkles; deep or abiding anger was impossible to her. Vexation was the limit of her blacker emotions. She lay looking out into the gardens, dimly aware that Huxter was out there about his business which included now and then a worshipful look from afar and a Huxterous sigh.

"What had happened to make both secretary and lawyer so preoccupied this morning?" she asked herself. Something quite out of the usual. What *was* happening, even now? Something of which she was not allowed even a hint! Why all this secrecy? It portended something big. It was mystery! She was even now in an atmosphere of stealth! Life went on tip-toe, its finger upon its lips!

And the roses! Mr. Steele had not sent them; Justin had not sent them! Who then? More mystery, divine mystery with a thrill in its delightful tail. Somewhere there was a lover cloaked in romance. . . .

All in all it was to be a day of days for her. For, that very noon, out of a clear sky came another event to thrill. At the table Haddon announced that he had left a purse with fifty dollars in it on his table. And that, remembering and going back for it, it was gone.

Rachel Stetheril looked at him sharply. Mr. Steele looked at him more penetratingly yet. Between Mr. Steele and Rachel Stetheril passed a very strange look. Mrs. Stetheril said sharply:

"Keep your mouth shut about it, Haddon. I'll talk with the servants myself."

And Evelyn, for the remainder of a rather lonesome day, had much to think upon.

CHAPTER XVII

THE STETHERIL MILLIONS AND A TIP FROM THEIR OWN

"WELL, Haddon," demanded Ashe coolly, "is it just another frame-up?"

The Black Witch in a mood which amply fitted the title had made a restive capture of Evelyn, dragging her away to the music room, commanding her, for God's sake, to play something decent. Ashe and Haddon were upstairs in their sitting room. Haddon's face was hard, his eyes very, very restless.

"What do you mean by frame-up?" he asked curtly. "And why another? When was the first?"

"The first which I remember having had to contend with," said Ashe lightly, "was many years ago. They're perennials. And by frame-up I mean a certain arrangement of circumstances to put a fellow like me in a place which it's difficult to get out of. I refer, of course, to the lost pocket-book."

"You do, do you?" sneered Haddon.

"I do," smiled Ashe.

Again, with a crisis in the air, it was Haddon who was anxious and nervous; Ashe who was watchful, but seemingly untroubled.

"You mean that I didn't lose a pocket-book at all, perhaps?"

"Perhaps." He nodded thoughtfully. "I mean that you are up to some game which is probably a big game at that. I mean that somehow you need me or think that you do. Otherwise why should you have dragged me into it at all? I mean that you're worried right now. Perhaps things are not going just right in your game. I mean that it looks as though you were getting ready to squeal on me, frame me up, railroad me to the pen. Considering my record it would be rather easy work, that, on the face of it. Yes," he added after a little abstracted pause, "on the face of it!"

Haddon moved back and forth through the room, chewing savagely at his unlighted cigar. Ashe lighted his pipe.

"Well," said Ashe again, "it's just a frame-up, is it?"

"You think I'm up to something crooked," said Haddon suddenly, coming to a sharp stop. "Why? What sort of a game?"

"I can't imagine! It would appear to me that you had all that you wanted in just marrying Mrs. Stetheril's millions. There are thirteen or fourteen of them, aren't there? Only, I don't quite see just how I am in a position to further your matrimonial ambitions."

Haddon stared at him a moment. Then, swinging on his heel he resumed his pacing. The house telephone upon the table rang. Ashe reached over and took it up.

"It's Mrs. Stetheril," he announced, putting it

down. "She wants you. She says Bond's had her letter by now. You're to drive in to Lockworth and make him sign the deeds."

"The old fool!" muttered Haddon. "She can't drive Bond like a child."

None the less he caught up his coat and hat and went to the door.

"By the way," he called back. "I think you'd better come with me, Steele. I've got something for you to do."

"If Mrs. Stetheril doesn't need me," grinned Ashe.

"Don't get fresh with me!" cried Haddon, his face reddening with sudden rage. "Don't get fresh with me, or by God . . . Come on!"

"There's a storm coming," mused Ashe as he followed. "And I can't even see where it's coming from! Gee! I'm a regular weather prophet!"

"I want Mr. Steele to help me with some work at the office," said Haddon, taking his orders from Mrs. Stetheril in silence. "If you don't need him . . ."

"If I don't need him!" she replied tartly. "But it happens that I do. Whose secretary is he, Haddon? Yours or mine? Go ahead and see Bond. And I'll give you five hundred dollars if you get him to sign those papers."

She dismissed Evelyn without ceremony, sent the lowering Haddon upon her errand, and told Ashe to follow her into her own office.

"Shut the door," she directed as Ashe came in.

She went to her chair but did not sit down. Instead she stood humped over her stick, her eye fairly boring into his.

"What do you know about Haddon's purse?" she taxed him without warning.

Ashe lifted his eyebrows quite innocently.

"Only what he said at the table," he answered. "He hadn't mentioned the matter to me before."

So sharp were her eyes now that they made him think uncomfortably of two-edged knives. They seemed cold steel whetted upon suspicion.

"I know my own household servants rather well," she told him summarily. "I don't know you so well. Did you . . . Now mind you don't lie to me! . . . did you steal that money?"

He returned her look squarely before answering. She was deeply moved. The hands upon her crooked stick were rigid. There was a look in her eyes now which he could not quite understand. It was borne in upon him that almost she was afraid that he would answer, "Yes."

"Mrs. Stetheril," he said slowly. "I did not."

"Don't you lie to me!" she snapped, thrusting her head forward in her eagerness. "Don't you lie to me! Tell me the truth. Did you take Haddon's fifty dollars?"

Ashe was thinking swiftly: "She did not mention this morning that she was going to send Haddon to Lockworth. She did not mention it at the table, even. She did not say anything in her letter to Bond about it. She has sent him away simply because she wants to talk with me . . . alone!"

"I did not take it," he answered quietly.

"Young man," she said, and now her harsh voice was shaking and her tense fingers trembled, "be careful what you say. Don't lie to me, I tell you!

It won't do any good. And I hate a liar. He's worse than just a plain thief! He's a coward and cowards are contemptible."

He nodded, said nothing, waited for her to go on, his eyes still steady upon hers.

"I'm going to make it my business to find out all about this affair," she continued. "If you did it I'll know it. I'd rather know about this than . . . than smash Bond, even! If you did it . . . if you did it . . . Listen!" It was almost a whisper now. "If you did it and will tell me I'll return the fifty dollars to Haddon out of my own pocket and I will keep my mouth shut. You've got Rachel Stetheril's word for that, and though I may or may not be a mean old devil, my word is as good as the word of Jesus Christ! You've got brains. Now think."

She paused a moment. Then she said once more, very, very slowly, an appreciable pause after each word,

"Did you take that money?"

"No," he answered. "I did not."

The clock upon the wall ticked many a time before either of them stirred. Its tickings sounded very loud. Rachel Stetheril's eyes bored and bored into him, searching out his hidden soul. He met her look frankly, conscious of a deep content that for once he was guiltless of the thing of which he might be accused. The sensation was novel.

"You are a mighty slick liar or you are telling me the truth," she grunted at last.

"Haven't you an idea which it is, Mrs. Stetheril?"

"Yes, I have. You might be crooked enough to

do a thing like this; I don't believe you are fool enough for it. Keep still. Let *me* do the talking! You're as sharp as tacks. Well, you'll need to be if you're going to be of any use to me. And I need a sharp young man around. There's a chance for you, a big chance. I like you. Understand? Any man I like I can put anywhere I want to! Understand? Anywhere! And remember . . ."

Ashe waited. She moved restlessly, closed her mouth almost with a snap, hesitated and finally blurted out:

"Don't lie to me . . . *about anything!* You keep on the right side of Rachel Stetheril and she'll see you through anything. Anything in the world. I don't care a hang what it is. And in the meantime, keep your mouth shut!"

The matter was closed. For the rest of the forenoon she fairly bullyragged him about upon a score of unimportant matters, not once again referring to Haddon's fifty dollars.

"What have I stumbled into?" pondered Ashe, when at last she allowed him the time for a stray thought of his own. "Good Lord! What sort of a game have I broken into? Talk about the country and the simple life!" . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TOUCHING OF HANDS

DAMMIT, sir, Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock was a gentleman, sir! He carried himself with the dignity of a stage-version field marshal of Napoleon. The older he grew, the rustier his clothes, the more dilapidated his buggy, only the more pronounced became the strut of a blue blooded son of the Old South. His father was a Georgian, his mother a Virginian. Younger physicians came into the valley and Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock's patients deserted him for a college boy with an automobile. But as his fortunes went down his grey mustaches went up and his imperial still held, here and there, greater prestige than a flashy car. His clothes had been seedy many a year, but he wore his broad hat with an air and put his money, faith, and feet into a pair of new boots that were marvels for smallness and heels.

Perhaps many of the valley had actually forgotten that he was a physician. They called him "Colonel." And he prided himself in the title which he wore like his hat and boots. He was a practitioner by force of circumstance ("Damn the Yankees!" be it parenthetically observed), a gentleman by birth and habit, a Colonel by the

blessing of blood. And altogether he was a prying, gossiping, meddlesome old fellow with the romantic head of a schoolgirl and a heart of gold. By no means as old as old man Beeson, nor yet as old man Warner, he had nevertheless reached, — and long ago passed, — the age of discretion. He was, perhaps, very much afraid of Rachel Stetheril. But being a gentleman and a soldier (by inherited title), he wore his goatee and mustaches fiercely before her, cocked his hat at an impudent angle and went straight to business like the devil he was.

"It's perfectly damnable, Madam! Damnable!" he announced quite in his best strain of the lordly air. "Such a thing is a disgrace to humanity, to Lockworth Valley, to you and me and everybody. And especially to you, if I may be allowed to say so!"

"Don't you come damning *me*, Colonel," warned Mrs. Stetheril. "You're apt to get your old head snapped off. What's wrong this time?"

"Wrong!" He rose upon his tightly squeezed-together toes, rocked back upon his high heels, and blew out his cheeks at her. "Wrong! Dammit, the world's out of joint."

He threw out his arms in a wide gesture, full of melodrama, dropped them to his sides hopelessly, shoved his hands into his pockets, and with tremendous dignity fell to chinking together therein certain metallic substances which gave forth a jingling sound, vastly less like that of coins than of nails and iron washers.

"Humph!" retorted the old woman. "Gener-

ally when a man says the whole world's out of joint it's just his own nose. Now I haven't got all day to talk. . . ."

"Madam!" cut in the Colonel loftily. "If you mean to insinuate that I have come before you in my own behalf, if the insidious serpent of suspicion . . ."

"I didn't mean a thing, bless you, Colonel," she said rather hastily. She remembered how, once, a good-humored mood upon her, she had been touched with compassion for the poor old fellow and had sent for him to doctor a simulated illness. He had detected her, had stalked out of her presence in a quivering rage, and had not spoken to her for a year thereafter. "But let's hear what you've got to say. Who's in trouble now?"

"It's Julia." The Colonel rose upon his toes again and spoke down to her from the heights. "Unless something is done for her and done right and done quick, she's going off like that!" He snapped his thin old white fingers nervously. "And she ought to be good for another forty years."

"Julia?" said the old woman frowning.

"Yes, Julia!" He rocked back upon his heels and rattled his nails and washers belligerently.

"Burn the man!" she cried then. "Who the devil is Julia? Is she the cook or the cat or somebody's new baby?"

"The cook!" snorted the Colonel. "Judas Priest, Madam! Or the cat! God's blood, Madam! Or somebody's new baby! Hell's bells! Rachel Stetheril, do you mean to tell me that you don't remember Julia? The woman who nursed your own

daughter when she'd have died but for that! Julia Camden, who . . ."

"Why didn't you say so?" demanded Rachel Stetheril sharply. "What's the matter with her?"

"Nothing much," he informed her sarcastically. "Just a trifling combination of an acute trouble needing an operation by a specialist, a bit of starvation thrown in, a mortgage with interest to pay, seeing her own children fighting their way up with no single helping hand, and so on. Just trifles."

For an instant Rachel Stetheril's old eyes clouded up like winter skies. Then they cleared as to a flash of lightning.

"I'm buying a lot of land for olives," she said tartly. "From that fool Bond. Hers is one of the small ranches Bond hasn't gobbled up. I'm going to buy that and a whole lot more. I'm paying fifty dollars an acre to all such as Julia Camden. How many acres has she got?"

"Eighty," said the Colonel.

"Well, that's four thousand dollars. . . . How much is the mortgage?"

"Five hundred."

"Shucks! Tell her I want that land so bad I take the mortgage over myself. What about her children? How many has she? How old are they?"

"Two. Ronald is two or three. Enid is about nineteen."

"What does the girl do?"

"She's taken the teachers' examinations. Until she gets a school she's working at your mills in Lockworth. I think she gets about six dollars a

week! She takes care of little Ronald on the side, and nurses her mother and . . ."

"Enid!" The old woman sniffed. "If they'd have been practical people they'd have named her Jane or Mary and wouldn't have been starving now. Tell her that I need a maid. How much do you want me to pay her for loafing around in my way?"

"If you give her what the position is worth," said the Colonel with meaning, "it will be about a thousand a week!"

"We'll compromise on a good deal less," was the tart rejoinder hiding a twisted smile. "Tell her to come right away. . . ."

"And Ronald?" suggested the Colonel.

"The three-year-old? Bring him along, of course. Curse such fool folks. . . . Why didn't they call him John or Sam?"

For a little the Colonel, speechless, teetered back and forth in an ecstasy of perfect happiness. Then he asked curiously,

"Why don't you let the girl go with her mother?"

"She needs a rest as much as Julia does," was the crisp explanation. "I won't have her spending her mother's money, either. And I won't have a girl like her going wrong in a big city. You bring her here or I wash my hands of the whole mess of you."

The Colonel considered offering his hand. Meditating the matter he whipped out an enormous silk handkerchief and blew his nose instead. His deep bow and her curt nod ended the conversation.

The Colonel in person went to San Francisco

with Enid's mother, disposing of his own business matters in Lockworth with a wide gesture. For a few days he superintended hospital physicians and nurses, much to their annoyance and no little to their amusement. Then, seeing his patient on her way toward convalescence, he came back to the valley. Enid was already at her new home.

Never, until now, had the girl so much as set foot within the great gardens. Her heart was beating quickly, her hand upon Ronnie's very tight, when they came up the broad flight of stairs. Upon the porch was a young woman lounging, looking pretty and idle and bored and exquisitely gowned. She turned languidly toward Enid and Ronnie, stared at them a moment in perfectly well bred impoliteness and turned away, leaving them and their affairs to Carter. Carter, having had his instructions, bowed so deeply that Ronnie's eyes bulged with wonderment and admiration and escorted them to Mrs. Stetheril in her own room.

"Colonel Bullock brought us your message," said Enid softly, her cheeks pink under the old woman's sharp look, but her eyes lifted in Enid's way. "He says that it is only business, but I know that you are being, oh, so kind to us!"

"Stuff!" said Mrs. Stetheril hurriedly. "If you folks had had any gumption you could have got twice as much out of me for that ranch. I was crazy for it. And if you're not a little fool you can be of a lot of use to me."

"How-dy-do!" said Ronnie, voice and tiny person alike swelling mightily for the occasion. He slipped his hand out of Enid's and came forward

with his baby swagger, offering it to Mrs. Stetheril. "I know who you are."

"Oh, do you!" grunted the old woman. She seemed to hesitate; then as Ronnie still held his hand out she took it into her thin old fingers.

"Ronnie!" admonished Enid quickly.

"That old humbug Bullock has told me all about you," she said a bit hurriedly, as though in haste to get it over with. "It seems you've got more brains than the rest of your crowd. Next term I'm going to see that you get a school if you want it. In the meantime I need you very much. Not as a servant, either. You're above that. I want a . . . a sort of companion. . . . Can you play for me when I want you to? Or read? That's good; I know you can. Well, this afternoon I'm going to be busy. You get used to the place, find out where things are in the house and . . . Oh, yes. Go out into the gardens and take Jennie with you. See that she selects the right kind of flowers for all the rooms. And . . . Well, keep out of my sight until after dinner! Wait a minute," as Enid started away. "If anybody calls you a servant slap his face. Good and hard! And tell him . . . Drat him, tell him your mother was the best friend I ever had. Now go get some roses in your arms and some more in your cheeks and come down to dinner with me!"

Today if there were clouds in Enid's sky they were the great, big, white, shining clouds of full summer, clouds that but make a more intense blue the sky about them. Her mother had gone where she would be cared for. The Colonel in the capacity

of Doctor had assured her that there was no danger in the world, that in a couple of months Mrs. Camden would come back to her stronger than she had been in years. Ronnie was asleep, and there was to be no worrying about the proper clothing and food for him. Mrs. Stetheril was going to see that she had a school next term! It was all like a fairy tale! And at dinner she would see that Mr. Steele whose eyes laughed so and who was so courtly a gentleman and whom Enid remembered quite as distinctly as he remembered her.

So it happened that Ashe, all unexpectedly, came upon her. She was in the garden, and he heard her laugh before he saw her. Here she was, true as life, just as though she belonged here, as though she'd been here all of her days! Huxter, fickle, fickle Huxter! was peering at her with wide-eyed admiration over the top of a rosebush while she watched two puppies roll and tumble upon the walk. Ashe came on to her swiftly.

"Where did you come from?" he asked her gaily. "You seem to have a way of appearing quite as though by magic!"

"Are you lost again?" she laughed at him.

"To tell the truth, . . . I am!" He had taken her hand, held it a moment in utter oblivion of Huxter's disapproval or the look in the eyes of the young woman lounging upon the porch. "Let's go sit down, and I'll tell you about it. I know where there's a little summerhouse that's the next best thing to the woods."

"I'm not sure that my duties are all done. . . ."

"Duties?" He chuckled. "Watching two pups

roll each other over? Come on. Where's Ronnie, by the way?"

"He's inside . . . asleep."

"Oh!" said Ashe. It was something of a surprise; he hadn't gathered from Enid's talk of the other day that she and Ronnie were in the habit of making themselves at home this way at the Big House. But he knew that he hadn't any business being surprised and he went on quickly: "He's a great little chap, isn't he? Look; I've got something for him."

He brought it out of his pocket. It was a fat little book he had found in a toy shop window in Lockworth. There, in perfectly wonderful and hideous and delightful pictures, were Jack the Giant Killer and Puss in Boots and Tom Thumb and Red Riding Hood and a most monstrous Wolf, and a Fairy Godmother, disguised in black cloak and peeked hat, bent double over her stick, and a whole array of kindred souls. Enid's eyes brightened at it.

"He'll just be tickled to pieces!" she announced positively.

"Listen," said Ashe. "When I was a little tad my mother used to tell me about Fairies. And when I was good they would bring me things. We were dreadfully poor, I believe, but there was always something, a stick of gum or an apple or a piece of candy. She always put them under my pillow. Let's go in while Ronnie's asleep. . . ."

"Isn't it wonderful? Why, the Fairies bring Ronnie things like that, too! And I always put them under his pillow while he's asleep!"

So Ashe, making her promise that she'd come back, allowed her to run away to the house and play Fairy to the sleeping Ronnie.

"He *is* a great little scout," thought Ashe. "And I don't know but that she is a Fairy after all! A fairy in the old Black Witch's house!"

Evelyn rang for Browdy and demanded a glass of water. With it she sought also a bit of information.

"Browdy," she said, hiding a lively curiosity under a most admirably managed yawn, "who were the young woman and child who asked for Auntie this afternoon?"

"Oh," said Browdy, "they're Enid Camden and her little brother Ronnie."

"And who," and Evelyn's second yawn was in no way inferior to the first, "are they?"

Browdy looked puzzled.

"They're . . . just the Camdens, Miss."

"Are they staying to dinner, Browdy?"

"Hadn't you heard?" Browdy was quite evidently pleased with the opportunity to gossip. "They've come to stay! Mrs. Stetheril's bought their place and Mrs. Camden's gone to San Francisco to have an awful bad operation and Enid and Ronnie are going to live here."

Evelyn lifted her eyebrows. Then she sighed. What was her aunt thinking of?

"Besides," went on Browdy, who had assimilated her news with mysterious swiftness, "Enid's going to get paid! Ain't she in luck?"

"Oh," said Evelyn, upon the whole relieved. "Auntie has generously taken her in as a servant. Of course! That's all, Browdy."

"You were gone an hour!" announced Ashe as Enid came back into the summerhouse. "Ronnie didn't wake?"

Enid shook her head.

"It's been an exciting day for him and he's tired out. He'll sleep the whole afternoon away. It was good of you to remember him."

"Nonsense," laughed Ashe. "He's not the kind to be forgotten."

"You were going to tell me," suggested Enid brightly, "all about being lost again." She surveyed him with eyes altogether too happy to be made quite serious. "You don't *look* lost!"

"Don't I? Well, I am. Lost in the sense that, while knowing where I am, I don't see the way out . . . like being lost in the woods the other day."

Now, he had never been in the habit of splitting his troubles with other people and he was not going to do so today. Because he couldn't. Not because he wouldn't like to, were it not so madly, utterly insanely impossible to do so. All day long he had been between the devil and the deep sea; Haddon was the devil, the deep sea was the unknown toward which Haddon was forcing him.

The chance word, "lost," had brought all of this almost up to his lips. Knowing that he must not talk with her about himself, still he found an absurd relief in the near-talking.

Enid looked at him curiously, sensing something of seriousness under his banter.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It is nothing," he told her readily. "Don't you have days when you're lost in a sort of mental

mist? When you feel like a ferry boat drifting in a heavy bay fog? And after a while the fog clears."

"I understand," she said quietly. "I wish that I could help you find yourself as I did the other day. The world is so bright for me today I want it to be bright for everybody."

Into Ashe's brain flashed a sudden determination. He would force from Haddon an explanation; he would force it somehow. He had, in sheer content with things as they were, through the recklessness which was part and parcel of his being, gone on carelessly from day to day. Now came a sudden-born bitterness toward Haddon; now a hot desire to shake off the hand which until this moment he had tolerated good-naturedly; now he was ready to fight for the thing which was his for this instant, this supremely satisfying content.

He would scarcely have sought to analyze this natural enough emotion had it not been for a trifling incident which cleared his brain magically. Staring out through the sunlit gardens he had unconsciously moved his hand a little upon the back of the bench. It rested a brief second upon Enid's hand, a hand at c wonderfully soft and warm, strangely feminin t the contact a thrill went dancing through h. blood. He jerked his hand away, his eyes going swiftly to Enid's, a strange surge of color in his face.

Just their hands that had touched lightly, and yet his blood was singing! Just the brushing of hand against hand and yet Enid, for a breathless instant, did not give him her eyes candidly. Only

that, and Ashe, at least, saw something clearly; only that, and a girl's heart was fluttering strangely!

"Gee!" said Ashe. And then he said nothing. And then the two of them, like two children, stared at the roly-poly puppies and sought vainly for the natural thing to say. When it had already been said in silence!

The musical tinkle of a gong was compassionate. Ashe got to his feet hastily.

"Dinner!" he announced triumphantly.

And talking merrily now they went up the long flower-bordered walk to the house. As they mounted the steps Evelyn nodded brightly to Ashe. She hadn't failed to note anything that was to be seen from the porch. To her sophisticated mind it was quite plain that Mr. Steele had been taken in, gullible-man-like, by a common pair of dimples, and man-like to the end, he had not even noted that Enid's dress was merely of gingham and home made at that. She was merely doing her duty, as she looked upon it, though indeed the duty was a pleasant one, when she said to Enid, scarcely looking at her:

"Take in my book and sunshade, please. Browdy will show you where to put them."

Enid looked at her, a little startled. Before she could frame an answer, however, Ashe had said quickly:

"Certainly, Miss Daly," quite as though Evelyn had spoken to him. He took up the articles in question, and said coolly to Enid:

"Shall we go in, Miss Camden?"

Old eyes are shrewd eyes and Rachel Stetheril,

having come to the door and stopped there, missed nothing of what had happened. She saw the flash of anger in Evelyn's eyes. Her stick tapped against the floor sharply.

"Steele, you and Evelyn go on in to dinner. I want to talk with Enid a minute."

Ashe bowed, smiled broadly, and went on. Evelyn, lifting her skirts and her eyebrows, swept by Enid. The old woman slammed the door after her. For a while she stood staring hard into Enid's eyes.

"So you and Steele know each other already?" she snapped unpleasantly.

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril."

"Humph. It didn't take you a year to get acquainted!"

"We met the other day," the girl told her quietly.

"Oh. You did, did you? And when did you meet? And where did you meet? Steele hasn't told me anything about it."

"Perhaps," and Enid smiled a little, "he didn't attach sufficient importance to the matter to think of mentioning it."

"I asked you *when* and *where?*"

"In the woods." Enid had stiffened a bit under the sharp words. "He was lost. It was the first day of May."

"You've taken trouble to remember the exact day, have you?" sneered the old woman angrily.

"You asked . . ."

"Don't tell *me* what I asked! It was the first day of May, was it? Humph!" She remembered Steele's absent-mindedness of the second day of May. She also remembered the looks she had seen

upon both Steele's face and Enid's as they had come up the steps. Suddenly she pounded her stick against the floor again. "Look here you . . . you little simpleton!" she cried, thrusting her face forward over her cane. "I won't have you making eyes at my secretary! Do you understand? I won't have it!"

Enid's breathing had quickened; her cheeks were flaming.

"Do you mind explaining just what you mean by that, Mrs. Stetheril?" she said, forcing into her words a low toned calmness.

"Mean!" gasped Rachel Stetheril. "Mean! I mean just what I say, you little pink faced fool! I always mean what I say!"

Enid stared at her a moment, her eyes filled with incredulity. Then, her head erect, without speaking, she passed to the door. Rachel Stetheril, stretching out a quick hand, caught her by the sleeve.

"Where are you going?" she demanded. "And why don't you answer?"

"There is nothing to say," Enid told her quickly. "And I am going to get Ronnie and go home!"

"You haven't got any home."

Enid bit her lip. But again she said nothing.

"Drat the girl! Can't you talk?"

"And I can keep from talking . . . when it is best that I should. You have been very good to us, Mrs. Stetheril. But that isn't sufficient reason for me to let you insult me, is it? If you'll allow me I'll take myself out of your way."

"Then go!" screamed the old woman, shaking with her rage. "Go and the devil take you!"

Enid, walking swiftly, went into the house and to her room. Ronnie was fast asleep, his chubby little fingers interlaced as Big Sister had taught him, thus were things of evil kept away. Peeping out from under the corner of his pillow was the book . . .

"You're a fool and I'm another . . . and I like you. Come to dinner, child!"

Enid turned in amazement. Rachel Stetheril came into the room and closed the door after her, this time softly.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Stetheril . . ."

"Oh, I apologize! I'd rather choke than apologize to the good God Almighty . . . but I ought to be ashamed of myself and . . . Devil take me, I am! I'm mean and I'm old and I can't help the one more than the other. If you want the whole truth I've been wanting that fool Steele to fall in love with that other fool Evelyn. But he isn't fool enough . . . and I'm glad of it. And . . ." She broke off a minute and slowly there crept into her eyes two big tears. Her voice was unbelievably weary and soft and humbled when she said: "I'm sorry, Enid. Won't you forgive me? And will you stay? Oh, I'll be mean to you again, I suppose, but I won't ever . . . be mean that way."

And in the end Enid came forward impulsively and put both of her arms about a very old and very wretched millionairess and Rachel Stetheril blew her nose resoundingly. Then they went in to dinner together.

And Evelyn stared.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ULTIMATUM

BOBBIE ASHE, having communed very soberly with himself, came to the conclusion that the wisest thing for him was to be ready to cut and run for it. He felt that his vacation was about to come to an abrupt and unsatisfactory end. He didn't want to leave the valley, for he had been very happy here. But he had even less desire to be led away to stand trial and go to prison. Haddon had made his first move; he had lied about having lost fifty dollars. Logically, the next thing would be another imagined crime, the accusation of Ashe, the fastening of evidence upon him.

And why? Ashe shook his head. Obviously the problem was not to be solved by him with the meager data he had. Obviously there was no sense in struggling with it until more data were obtainable. He must do as he had done, keep his eyes open . . . and his toothbrush in his pocket. And, to be quite ready to go just a little ahead of the lawyer and the law, he must see Enid again.

Mrs. Stetheril liked him; to a certain extent she would befriend him. But when Haddon proved that Mr. Steele was the same as Robert Ashe, and Robert Ashe the same Ladyfingers who had sought to take

her diamond, what then? No; if Haddon was really beginning to lay a train of evidence it was plainly up to Bobbie Ashe to be ready to be on his way.

He had little money. Haddon had seen to that, keeping clipped the wings of his captive bird.

"He's getting ready to accuse me of taking his fifty," Ashe told himself meditatively. The thought equally amused and insulted him. In the end it angered. If those who knew him heard of it, what would they say? Ladyfingers contenting himself with fifty dollars! And taking that where it lay upon a table!

"I might as well have the game as the name," he decided. "If Haddon has anything he'd better go bury it."

Now he watched Haddon more closely than Haddon had ever watched him. He saw that Haddon was worried. He tried to interpret his uneasiness. He accepted as axiomatic that in some way it was connected with him. It might mean that Haddon was undecided that he was hesitating before taking some final step from which there was no return. On the other hand it might mean that Haddon had decided, that that step had been already taken, that his anxiety grew from his uncertainty as to where it would end.

"It's heads and tails," Ashe finally told himself. "But it's my bet that the time's come for him to do his part and he is having trouble stiffening his will up to it. He's just lashing himself with his tail, getting ready. And I think I can tell by his eyes when he's got himself in hand."

The mail came and brought the little book for Enid. He took it to his room and wrote in it,

"Enid Camden, from . . . "

And there he stopped. He wanted to write, "From Robert Ashe, alias Ladyfingers, who is human after all." He didn't want to write, "From Ambrose Steele." He didn't like either name. He had gotten just so far when Haddon came in. Ashe slipped the book into his pocket. One glance at Haddon and he sighed, filled his pipe, and said quietly,

"I'm glad we're going to get down to business at last!"

For he had seen Haddon's eyes. He had seen in them the look which he knew must come before the time of actual danger. The uncertainty was gone. They were hard and purposeful.

Ashe was in the sitting room which joined his own and Haddon's bed-rooms. Haddon passed him in silence, saw that the two bed-rooms were unoccupied and that the doors were closed, and then came back to Ashe.

"I'm going to give you your chance," he said, dropping his voice. "Tonight."

Ashe nodded.

"Tonight," he answered. "I'm ready."

"My own personal affairs," went on Haddon in the same low tone, "are nobody's business but mine. But I'll tell you just this much of them. I need money, a whole lot of money, and I need it quick!"

"So!" smiled the boy. "You're human, too!"

"I don't need your conviction. I have told you all along that you can go free and with money in

your pocket if you do as I tell you. It'll be up to you to go fast and go far."

"What I've been telling myself. And I start tonight?"

"If you are here tomorrow morning I shall notify the county sheriff in Lockworth that you are Ladyfingers, the San Francisco thief. I shall wire the same information to San Francisco."

"I'd just like to know," suggested Ashe, "how you'll explain the fact that you, yourself, introduced me to Mrs. Stetheril as Mr. Steele, your private secretary?"

"Don't mistake me for a fool," said Haddon sternly. "I've got that matter properly arranged. You forged a letter of introduction, a letter which I have carefully filed away, and . . ."

"I get you. Never mind the details," laughed Ashe. "Now about the program for tonight."

"I want ten thousand dollars. What is more, I have got to have it."

"If I had it, my dear fellow . . ."

"Get it."

"And where, please?"

"From the Lockworth bank."

"Oho. So that's it!"

"That's it, exactly it."

"Ten thousand? That's a good sized chunk of money to be lying around idle in a little country bank, isn't it?"

"It will be there tonight. And a good deal more. Ten thousand is all I want, in bank notes. The rest of it . . ." Haddon threw out his hands. "You'll be leaving in a hurry and you'll need all you can get."

Ashe eyed him curiously. Again he was seeking to cast up a swift estimate of Haddon's character. Haddon wanted him to rob a bank, had, no doubt, already smoothed the way for him. Haddon wanted ten thousand dollars . . .

"Suppose," said Ashe tentatively, "that I obey orders. That I crack the nut and make a get-away with it. That there is, as you say, a lot more than ten thousand there. That there is, let us say, twenty-five or even fifty thousand. Then what?"

"I want ten thousand," said Haddon bluntly. "If there's a hundred thousand it's all one to me. Keep all you can get or leave it in the bank."

"That's funny," observed Ashe thoughtfully. "How does it happen," he asked abruptly, "that you need ten thousand so badly and in such a hurry?"

For a moment Haddon made no answer. Ashe's eyes studied him with wonderful keenness. He wanted Haddon to talk. He felt that in a way his whole future might hang upon a word from Haddon's lips. And in the end Haddon answered.

"I have told you that my business is my business and not yours. But I want you to know that you are in no position to fool with me. I allowed myself to be tempted into a speculation that looked good. It was rotten. I lost . . . well, more than I could afford. I've got to get it back."

"I see," said Ashe.

And he thought that he did see that Haddon was lying. He did not believe that Haddon had done the thing he hinted at. Haddon was not the type of man to speculate, to plunge beyond safety, to get into water over his head, to embezzle money to gam-

ble with. Haddon was in no sense a gambler. In a business deal of any sort he would do just as he was seeking to do now; be sure of the ground underfoot; be sure that there was a safe way out.

Haddon was not the man to take a chance. And yet he was taking a chance now. If Ashe sought to rob the Lockworth bank, if he failed and were apprehended, then Haddon stood in a fair way of being implicated as an accessory before the fact. Haddon was a lawyer and knew just what that meant. It meant ruin. And yet he was doing it! He was driving strongly against the current of character and habit, and that the fight had been hard had showed in his eyes for a week. Then why was he doing it?

It must be because he was already in danger, because he had embezzled and must make restitution, or because he played for some stake a great deal bigger than ten thousand dollars.

While Haddon watched him, supposing that Ashe was thinking about his offer, Ashe was in fact thinking swiftly about what reasons might have brought Haddon to the point of making it. And presently, feeling that he needed more help from Haddon himself, the boy asked softly and in simulated carelessness,

"Mrs. Stetheril hasn't suspected anything yet?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Haddon.

"About the money, of course. If you're in deep it must have been her money you used. The Lord knows she has enough of it."

For just a fraction of a second Haddon hesitated. That brief instant was eloquent to Ashe.

"No," answered Haddon. "She hasn't suspected anything. She mustn't suspect."

"I see," said Ashe.

And now he was certain that he did see. It was as plain as he could wish that Haddon was lying about the money. No matter how many millions Mrs. Stetheril might have, no matter how much Haddon was in her confidence, he had never taken a cent of her money without her knowledge. Nor had anyone else in the wide world. Mrs. Stetheril's money was handled by none other than Mrs. Stetheril.

"I am pretty close to desperation," said Haddon. "And yet I haven't lost my head and I'm not going to lose it. I am going to take no chances whatever. You are going to take them all. You've been with me to the bank times enough to know your way around. The night watchman is a joke to such as you. You'll get the money before midnight. At one o'clock you'll bring me my ten thousand here. Then you'll take a horse and ride to the Junction. If you ride like the devil you'll be there by a little after four. At four-fifteen a train goes through, westbound. At five-twenty there is an east-bound train. There'll be freights. At about nine o'clock they'll find out that the bank has been robbed. About the same time you will be missed."

He broke off, shrugging his shoulders. It went without saying that it then became no business of Justin Haddon's.

"Yes," meditated Ashe. "I *am* taking all the chances. Suppose that I shouldn't like the layout? That I should say," and he grinned pleasantly, "go rob your own bank?"

"Then," came with crisp decision, "you're a fool! I've lost a purse with fifty dollars in it. I've suspected you. I'll see that the purse is found among your belongings. I'll see that it becomes discovered that you are Robert Ashe. I'll see that Lieutenant Ambrose of the San Francisco police is informed."

"That won't get you your ten thousand," Ashe reminded him.

"True," replied Haddon quietly. "But I am really counting upon you that. Since there is every reason in the world you should do as I tell you to."

"And no reason why I shouldn't?" mused Ashe. He sighed. "It looks as though you were right, Haddon."

The telephone rang. Ashe took it up and said a pleasant "Good morning" into it.

"Mrs. Stetheril," he explained, rising. "It cuts short our confidences. She says to tell you she's declared war against Bond and that she's going after him immediately. You and I are to go right down to her."

"First," said Haddon sharply, "I want to know what you are going to do."

"Oh," said Ashe. "About the bank?"

"Don't speak so loud!" commanded Haddon. "Yes."

"Why, crack it of course! Here's hoping it proves to be worth the opening."

He ran down the stairs, slightly ahead of Haddon. Maybe, after all, he'd be able to write in Enid's book, "From Robert Ashe."

. . . . . .

"I'm going after that fool Bond tooth and toe nail," Mrs. Stetheril announced as they came into her office. "I can't waste a lot of time on a little rat like him, either. Steele, get me my bank books. Haddon, is that brick building of Forster's still vacant?"

"I believe . . ." began Haddon.

"Shut up! Telephone and find out."

Steele brought the required books. Haddon telephoned and announced,

"It's vacant, Mrs. Stetheril."

"Rent it," she commanded. "I want it for a month. Take a year's lease if you can't get it any other way. Steele, use the other telephone. Get Ed Truesdale."

"I've got him," said Steele in a moment. "What'll I do with him?"

"Give him to me. That you, Truesdale?" she demanded crossly. "Yes, I'm Rachel Stetheril. I'm getting ready to start a bank in Lockworth. I want your account. Eh? What's that? I'll pay you five per cent on your savings account. How much are you depositing with Bond? Now, look here. I want a favor. Draw every cent out today, will you? Maybe you can put it back tonight, maybe you can't. I've rented the brick house right across from the bank. I'll take care of your cash for you. Yes, I want you to draw out your money by noon."

Evidently Truesdale had agreed to her astounding request. She clicked up the receiver with a grim smile upon her lips.

"Get me Brown of Brown, Lee & Porter," she directed Steele. "Well, Haddon, got it?"

"Rented for three months at forty-five dollars . . . "

"All right. Get Hanlin and Carpenter. I'll talk to 'em. Got Brown yet, Steele?"

And to Brown and then to Hanlin and later to a score of other men she spoke as she had to Truesdale. Man after man of them she told to draw out their moneys from the Lockworth bank, man after man of them promised to do as she directed. Ashe began to marvel afresh at this old woman's power here in her own valley. Many of these men were more than well-to-do. But she was Rachel Stetheril; she had done much for more than one of them; she could do much more; she was a friend worth having; she was an enemy that no man, knowing her, coveted.

"That'll start a run on his pesky old bank that'll make him remember me," she said with deep satisfaction. "I'll go after the little boys later on. Steele, get me Dan Martin. Haddon, get me Henry French."

Henry French and Dan Martin answered in due time Both, it seemed, were directors of the Lockworth bank. So were Oliver and McBride with whom she talked next. And every one she told bluntly that she had heard that Arnold Bond was slated for their president, and that she hoped they'd go slow until they'd talked with her.

"Get me Long Distance," was the next command. "Billy Houghton at the Merchants' Exchange, San Francisco."

And him she directed to start in selling her shares in the Rock Creek Milling Company. Sell below par, start a scare, jump the stocks down.

"Bond's put a lot of money in that concern," she mused. "I believe I gave him the tip. Well, I'll scare him stiff."

She sat a moment in silence, frowning at her stick.

"Haddon," she said at last, "run into Lockworth. Get that building straightened up. Get a sign painted that I am opening a bank as soon as the law'll allow, that I am lending money on first mortgages up to two thirds actual value at six per cent. Steele, take a letter."

The letter, to Arnold Bond, Esq., Lockworth, read:

"Dear Sir:—

There's a job open at my place for a sober, husky young man of twenty-eight. Two dollars a day and found. Apply immediately to Huxter, head gardener, if interested.

Respectfully,
Rachel Stetheril."

"Now, Steele, you come along with me. I want the fun of drawing out my money myself."

And, a joyous light of battle in her eyes, she led the way to the waiting car. In Haddon's eyes was a frown of bewilderment which he sought to hide from her. Ashe wondered if he'd have to rob a bank that night or not. If so, whose bank?

CHAPTER XX

THE METHODS OF RACHEL STETHERIL MILLIONAIRESS

ARNOLD BOND, having no premonitory warning of what the day held in store for him, appeared at the bank that morning with his customary pleasant smile and broad good humor. It was a bright morning, the world was a first-rate place, and he had had a healthy young man's hearty breakfast.

Even Ed Truesdale's early call to withdraw his funds made no apparent change in Mr. Bond's good humor. He did note, rather subconsciously, that Truesdale's manner was hurried, that the rancher did not stop to shake hands and tell him "the latest," but Bond in his serenity attributed this haste to the same imagined business deal which had caused Truesdale to want a lot of cash.

But little by little as the morning wore on the smile faded from Bond's eyes and a look of uncertainty came into them. Brown of Brown, Lee & Porter came in shortly after Truesdale had gone out, his air strangely furtive, passed Bond with a quick nod, and drew out something over twelve thousand dollars. Bond reported the matter to Broughton, the president. Broughton looked at him rather strangely and grunted. Bond went back to his window and waited. That he didn't know what he was

waiting for in no way altered the fact that he was waiting for Something.

He had never had much faith in the lazy man's theory that "All things come to him who waits." But it seemed a workable theory this forenoon. Depositors of amounts large and small came in in a steady stream, and almost without exception they drew to the last nickel of their accounts. About eleven o'clock President Broughton, very taciturn this morning, called Bond to him and pointed out of the window. Across the street some men were putting up a great-letter[illegible] sign over the Forster brick building. The sign read:

"Leased by the Rachel Stetheril Banking Company."

Then even the faded smile became a thing of the past.

"I was going to resign next month," Broughton said curtly. "But I am not going to see this bank ruined. I'll keep my own shoes on until I see where this thing ends."

Bond understood perfectly the old axiom which says that two things can't be in the same place at the same time. It might be extended to read, "Two men can't wear the same pair of shoes at the same time." He went back to his own desk thinking . . . thinking hard. And fast.

Then Rachel Stetheril, Bobbie Ashe with her, came in at the door and straight to Bond's desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Bond!" said the old woman brightly. Bond had never known that it was possible for her to be one half so pleasant.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stetheril," he returned her

greeting, . . . rather stiffly for him. He knew that Broughton was watching and listening.

"You may have noted, Mr. Bond," went on Mrs. Stetheril pleasantly, "that I have deposited a lot of money during the last few months?"

"We have appreciated your patronage," said Bond. "Yes, I have noted."

"Altogether I have done rather well," continued Mrs. Stetheril. "Haven't I? I have dumped a good many thousands in here for you to take care of for me."

"The amount has been rather unusual for a country bank. We have not been . . ."

"That's all right," she said amiably. "I'm going to draw it out right after lunch. Steele and I shall eat at the Stetheril Hotel. I mention it now to give you a sort of warning, since I'm going to want the whole thing . . . in cash."

"In cash," said Bond.

"Also," smiled Mrs. Stetheril, "I wanted your advice upon a certain matter. I have telephoned my agent in San Francisco to start selling my shares in the Rock Creek Milling Company. Shares are apt to drop, aren't they?"

Bond made many strange little curlicue designs upon a pad of paper with a tensely held pencil before he lifted his eyes.

"Perhaps," he said coolly.

"Also," she went on, "I am thinking of starting a bank of my own. What do you think of it? Also, keeping an interest in this bank, a purely friendly and in no sense a business interest, I am going to speak to the directors about the vacancy in the presi-

dency. In case there should be a vacancy. I shall want to speak with Mr. Broughton about that, first."

"I understand you perfectly, Mrs. Stetheril," Bond managed to say quietly. "You are going to do all that you can to break me."

"Oh, mercy no! No. *All* that I can. That won't be necessary. Good morning, Mr. Bond. Remember that Steele and I lunch at the hotel. In case you should want to speak with me . . . about anything, you know . . . you'll know where to find me."

Now Bond was beaten before the game began and he knew it. Mrs. Stetheril was in a position . . . none better! . . . to do his bank no end of injury. And, in the light in which the bank officials would look at the matter, the whole trouble would be resolved back in its beginnings to him. He had tried a bit of sharp business with her and she had been stubborner than he had anticipated. Upon his pad of paper he made no longer strange curlicue designs but rather very sensible, banker's sort of figures. He estimated that for certain olive lands he had spent $20,000. That he had hoped to have sold the eight hundred acres for $40,000, thus clearing one hundred per cent on the quick turnover. That now Mrs. Stetheril was offering the absurdly low sum of $8,000. If he accepted this he would be losing $12,000. So much was quite clear.

If, however, he refused to lose this $12,000 . . . then what? Would Rachel Stetheril "let up" on him until she had caused him to lose more than that? Could she seriously harm him with his bank? The pencil upon the pad, like a knowing planchette, wrote "Yes." Could she cause him to lose his expected

promotion? The pencil hung in doubt a little; then Bond stole a quick look at Broughton's dark face and the pencil wrote "Yes" so emphatically that the point broke. Arnold Bond didn't sharpen it. Instead he tossed it into a waste-paper basket, put on his hat, and went to lunch early.

"I know when I've got hold of the wrong end of a thing," he told her over the spotless tablecloth . . . there were many tables in the big dining room but only the one cloth which could positively be held to be spotless . . . "What is your offer? Ten dollars an acre for the eight hundred?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Stetheril. "You're talking about those olive lands? I'd almost forgotten them."

Bond looked at her curiously.

"I thought . . . " he began.

"Steele," she cut in sharply. "Didn't you mail my letter to Mr. Bond? He should have had it by now."

Then Bond understood fully. His face reddened. Into his eyes came a look of rebellion.

"You can't mean to hold to that ridiculous bluff of yours to make me come whimpering to your back door, begging for a job!"

"Young man," she told him with the first hint of tartness. "I don't ask you to whimper; that's disgusting. I don't ask you to beg; that's disgraceful. For a man to ask for an honest job is neither."

Bond stared at her, speechless, for an instant struck mentally blind. Steele had been looking over a newspaper. Now Bond, through his confusion, saw that Steele was holding the paper so as to hide his face from his employer, and that he was nodding at Bond eagerly and emphatically.

Ladyfingers

It was characteristic of Arnold Bond that when he saw that the trail he had been following led nowhere, or straight into trouble, on that instant he left it for another; equally characteristic of him that when he knew he had found the right trail he kept to it stubbornly whether it led up or down temporarily. In most matters he had a banker's clear-thoughtedness. His success until now had hinged very largely upon his ability to see a crisis and act in time.

The merry-eyed, likable young chap whom Mrs. Stetheril had made her private secretary was still nodding at him earnestly. Bond, as his brain cleared and cooled a little from the quick flash of anger, thought swiftly, balancing figures, seeking to weigh unknown but imaginable factors. Even so perhaps he would have done the wrong thing had it not been for the fact that he was gifted with the sense of humor. He rose, bowing gravely.

"I shall explain to Mr. Broughton that very urgent business will keep me from the bank until further notice," he said colorlessly. "Thank you for the place, madam!"

He touched his forelock. Then he walked out. Mrs. Stetheril stared after him, her eyes widening. Suddenly she put her hand upon Ashe's arm, her grip tightening convulsively.

"I wouldn't have believed it!" she gasped. "I didn't think Arnold Bond had it in him. He's a brick and . . . Steele, let's draw out our money and go home!"

"You are going to draw it out anyway?" asked Ashe.

"Come on," she cried quickly. "We're going to

see this thing through. But who'd have thought Arnold Bond had as much sense as that!"

An hour later when Arnold Bond made his appearance at the back door of the Big House, Rachel Stetheril, peeping out at him from a pantry window, giggled delightedly. Bond was nothing if not thorough. He was dressed as no one in Lockworth could have imagined him, in a pair of old, dilapidated trousers, torn flannel shirt, battered hat, shoes which he must have discovered in somebody's back yard. He was unthinkably disreputable. Across his cheek was a great smear of dirt. He was twirling his dusty hat in his fingers.

"He is an artist!" choked Rachel Stetheril. "I'm going to make that man's fortune for him!"

CHAPTER XXI

EVELYN REVELS IN MYSTERY

NOW, here was Sir Mystery wedded to Maid Romance, and Evelyn Daly's joy-steeped soul reeling deliciously. Arnold Bond, young, good looking, and well-to-do, therefore worth any girl's looking at twice, was in the garden . . . working with a rake and hoe! Furthermore he was *disguised!* Disguised so that Evelyn had rubbed her eyes and refused at first to believe them. The cashier of the Lockworth bank at the Stetheril place in the rôle of a common laborer! *Disguised!*

Why? The Heiress wanted to know immediately and Evelyn, blushing a beautiful deepening pink, answered without hesitation. Had there not been eloquence in Arnold Bond's look whenever she had seen him in Lockworth? Had not her horrid aunt quarreled with him, no doubt forbidding him the house? And had not Bond, heroically determined upon not being thwarted by any meddlesome old woman in the world, contrived thus to at least be near, to see . . .

It set her heart tripping. She was sure that again and again he cast longing glances toward the house . . . that now, while she peeped out at him from behind the porch vines, he was sighing deeply. If he

could only know that even now she was looking at him! If he could only guess that she, just she alone, understood! If he could hear the quick beating of her heart! If . . .

"The roses!" she whispered eagerly. "The white roses each morning!"

Her bright eyes brightened; her leaping heart leaped higher. How had he managed to do it? Had he come each night, in the dark, had he crept stealthily about the grounds, had he entered the house like a "thief in the night" . . . Oh, wonderful thief to steal a maiden's heart! . . . leaving his graceful, fragrant plea? Evelyn had thrilled often at her own thoughts, she was rather in a habit of thrilling, but certainly never until now had so delirious an ecstasy danced through her blood.

Bond paused a moment, leaned upon his hoe, cocked an eye up at the sun and then stood looking at his hands.

"Poor dear, blistered hands!" murmured Evelyn softly. For were not they the soft hands of a gentleman, blistered in the name of True Romance? The capitals are Evelyn's.

Out in the garden Bond sighed. Behind the porch vines Evelyn sighed. There could be no doubt that now he was casting a longing look toward the house, though of course a stupidly matter-of-fact person might have contended that his gaze wandered toward the kitchen and that perhaps the unusual morning's work had put into Mr. Bond's mind mere sordid thoughts of boiled potatoes and thick slices of cold roast. The same stupid person might have held that his sigh was less the amorous and tender ex-

pression of a lover's passion than the panting breath technically known as "blowing" of a man unused to hard work.

Bond took the hoe handle again into his poor, dear blistered hands and winced at the contact of hard wood and soft flesh. And then he did something which, technically speaking again, is known far and wide as "soldiering." Under cover of seeming activity he was resting. Going into this thing as he had done, accepting the inevitable as a joke, he had not taken into account that just pottering about all the morning in the hot sun would become extremely unpleasant. He was ashamed to throw up his hands and quit; he had tackled the contract and he was going to see it through. But he should have liked to lie down somewhere in the shade and take a nap.

That being quite out of the question . . . he had the uneasy feeling that the Old Black Witch was spying upon him all of the time! . . . he did the next best thing. He seemed suddenly to find something demanding a gardener's attention at the root of a rosebush. He went down on his knees, poking around and putting in time.

"He is kneeling!" Evelyn's heart missed a beat and then resumed its knocking at her breast as though it were crying, "Open! Open and let my Lord Love in!" And Evelyn, as though she were communing with her impatient heart, was whispering excitedly: "He is kneeling at our rosebush!"

She saw Enid and her aunt's secretary loitering in the shade of the summerhouse, saw them vaguely as through a great distance, feeling that they were not in this same world. She saw Ronnie gleefully

chasing a gleeful puppy or being chased by it, round and round the summerhouse. So far as they entered into the scheme of that creation inhabited at this moment by Evelyn Daly, Heiress, and Arnold Bond, Hero, they might as well have been a couple of wrens.

Evelyn went swiftly to her room, running up the stairs. With quick fingers she chose the queen of the white roses upon her dressing table. Before the mirror she smiled into a pair of smiling eyes, fastened the rose deftly in her hair, arranged the hair itself a little more bewilderingly, and powdered her nose. Whereupon, being armed and armored for the fray, she went downstairs demurely, swinging her big straw hat in her hand. She always liked to have something in her hands.

"I wish the roses weren't red!" thought Evelyn as she went through the garden. For she was singing softly, and the song which had suggested itself at the critical moment was,

"Oh, my luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
Oh, my luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune . . ."

Bond, on his knees, deep in meditation if not actually dozing, started and put out a quick hand for his hoe. Evelyn, coming upon him with the big white rose in her hair and the red rose song upon her lips, also started. He somewhat guiltily; she prettily.

"Oh!" she said. It meant, "Dear me! I had no idea that there was anyone else here!" And then as she looked at him wonderingly she said breathlessly, "Oh! Mr. *Bond!*"

Bond, caught unaware, coughed and grasped his hoe handle firmly like an old knight, thought Evelyn, with a lance. And, for no definite reason he could lay his mind to, he began to grow slowly and steadily and hotly red.

"Mr. *Bond!*" murmured Evelyn. "Oh, how *could* you!"

Bond looked embarrassed. Perhaps he was. It was evident that Evelyn had heard nothing from Rachel Stetheril. The girl would think him mad. Maybe he was mad. She was a remarkably nice looking girl, cool and fresh looking and gowned most attractively. He wished he hadn't gone quite so far in this idiotic make-up; he might at least have omitted the artistic smear across his cheek. Nor had there been any sense in getting such a ridiculous pair of shoes. And he'd have to explain.

"You didn't know?" he began rather lamely for Arnold Bond, capable cashier of the Lockworth bank. "I . . . I thought that maybe you . . ."

He broke down quite naturally since he hadn't had anything in his mind except a jumble of fragments composed largely of a newly kindled anger toward Mrs. Stetheril for putting him in such a fool's fix.

Evelyn's eyes were shining.

"That I would understand?" she offered softly.

Bond mopped his forehead with the very handkerchief he had bought for the occasion, a hideous blue and white affair something less than a yard square. Then he stuffed it hurriedly into his pocket.

"Your aunt," he began stiffly, "is a woman who looks at everything from her own particular point of view. We have differed upon a certain matter. To

put it into plain English, she's got it in for me, good and plenty. It is because of a certain attitude which she has taken that I'm here like this. You see, Miss Daly . . ."

"Oh!" said Evelyn again. It was true then! "It is so warm here," she offered. "Shall we stroll down to one of the summerhouses? Not that one," quickly. "Two of the servants are there."

Bond dropped his hoe and looked at her gratefully. She was already leading the way. But Huxter's eye had seen them from across the garden, Huxter's voice said loudly,

"Can I see you a minute, Bond?"

"The impudence of him!" gasped Evelyn.

But Bond, merely shrugging his shoulders, said, "Will you pardon me just a second?" and went toward Huxter.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Stetheril give me my orders," said Huxter sullenly, his eye coming back lingeringly from Evelyn. "You know what they were. You were to keep busy and if I saw you loafing I was to make you get busy again. You know Mrs. Stetheril . . . Mr. Bond."

For at close range a little of Huxter's assurance had left him. Bond's eye was neither a kind nor yet a humorous eye just now.

"You go to the devil, Huxter," said Bond shortly.

"That'll be Mrs. Stetheril, sir," grunted Huxter. I was to tell her if you got obstreperous. I'd get my head took off if I didn't."

"Go then," said Bond furiously. But no sooner had the words come than he thought better of the

matter. After he had gone this far there was no sense in spoiling everything. "She won't know, Huxter," he said more pleasantly. "Here." He slyly dropped a gold piece to the ground and pushed it toward the head gardener with his foot. "Stick that in your pocket and keep out of sight for a while." The ten-dollar piece winked up at Huxter alluringly, tempting the soul of him. Bond turned away; Huxter caught up the gold and retreated across the grounds, muttering to himself as he went.

Bond was an astute young man who had formed early in life the excellent habit of keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut. He learned a great deal from a half hour with Evelyn in the little summer-house down by the creek. Evelyn did a great deal of the talking. She even did the major part of explaining Bond's presence here today in his "disguise." She made it quite easy for Bond's silence to be a silent confession. Bond learned about the roses. Then he did some reasoning.

The flowers had come regularly. Rachel Stetheril had not sent them; Haddon had not; Mr. Steele had not. Then who? When the half hour had gone swiftly and Evelyn reluctantly, he sought out Huxter.

"I gave you ten dollars, Huxter," he said crisply, all banker again.

"Yes, sir," said Huxter. "Thank you, sir."

"You've got a good thing here. Good wages and easy work."

"I'm not complaining," admitted Huxter with a wink.

"I should think not," said Bond dryly. "You

manage to put something by. You've got a couple of hundred in the savings bank, haven't you, Huxter?"

"Two hundred and forty dollars," said Huxter with an air.

"Ah. And it draws four per cent. Hm. You'll never get rich at that rate, Huxter. Come in and see me at the bank sometime. I can arrange it so that you can get eight per cent. That's just double, Huxter."

"Would it be safe like, sir?" asked Huxter, impressed.

"Absolutely. And maybe . . . Let me see. Maybe I could let you in on a little private deal which would double your money in six months."

"I . . . I don't like to gamble, sir."

"I'm a banker, not a poker player!" said Bond sternly. "When I say a thing is safe it is just as good as the gold in your pocket."

"Thank you, sir," said Huxter, his eyes eager. "When could I get my money down on it, so to speak?"

"So to speak you can get your money down on it tomorrow if you'll come to me at the bank. And . . . Oh, there's something else. I have just been talking with Miss Daly and she tells me that someone has been annoying her, Huxter. It must stop."

"Annoying her?" said Huxter quickly, his big hand balling up into a grimy fist. "Let me at him, sir!"

"It's one of the servants, I think," said Bond. "We mustn't let anything be said about it. Someone has been bothering her by putting a lot of roses upon the hall table, her name on them."

He looked at Huxter quite innocently. He had been in the head gardener's cabin, and had seen an old typewriter there.

Huxter's face went red, painfully red. Bond pretended not to have seen.

"Just keep your eye out for the fellow," he said carelessly. "Miss Daly wants to know who he is so that she can speak to her aunt and have him dismissed. I'll give you another ten dollars if you'll find out and let me know."

Huxter's answer was unintelligible. Bond went happily for his hoe.

"Tonight," he apostrophized no visible person in the sunlit gardens, "you are going to find on your table the biggest bunch of roses you ever saw!"

And he continued to smile as he thought of how he might square the game with Mrs. Rachel Stetheril, if fate were kind and Evelyn kinder.

CHAPTER XXII

HADDON'S GRIP TIGHTENS

JUSTIN HADDON, seeking Evelyn Daly, saw her and Bond talking earnestly and intimately down by the creek. He went back to the steps and waited for her. He showed no evidence of impatience beyond the furious smoking of his cigar, which he tossed away as he witnessed her pretty farewells to the banker. Before Bond had found Huxter at the rear of the house Haddon was at Evelyn's side.

She nodded at him brightly. Haddon frowned. For she had smiled at him precisely as she had been smiling at the rosebushes, at the sweep of rolling landscape, at the clear sky. And she was passing on when he detained her by saying briefly:

"Will you give me a word, Evelyn?"

"Two, if you like," she told him gaily. "Maybe three if you are real nice."

He did not rise to her mood, did not seek to nor pretend to. He stood square before her in the path, looking at her steadily.

"Evelyn," he said, "we don't seem to see a great deal of each other lately, do we?"

Evelyn flashed her eyes at him, lifting her shoulders. She sensed a little passage at arms which

in no way alarmed her. Such emotional frays were the breath in her nostrils, the blood in her veins.

"Don't we?" she countered coolly. "It seems to me, Justin, that we see each other at lunch and at dinner, in the afternoons and in the evenings. . . . Of course, there are times when you are so *dreadfully* busy. . . ."

"You know what I mean," interrupted the lawyer. "And, if there are days when I am dreadfully busy, you know why, whose future I always have in mind."

Evelyn, in her innumerable encounters, had always fared best when the engagement was of the skirmishing order rather than that of direct, pitched battle. The tone of Haddon's words, supplemented by what a quick glance showed her in his steady eyes, warned her that there were difficulties ahead. She sought to divert him by a continuation of inconsequential levity. But again he was not to be diverted.

"Are you going to marry me, Evelyn?" he demanded bluntly. "Or are you not?"

"Oh!" said Evelyn, drawing a little back, her voice uncertain. Soon or late she had known it must come to this, but she had always let the time for adjustment lie beyond the mists of tomorrow. She hated to talk in the direct fashion Haddon was insisting upon; without circumlocution her spirit was without wings. At the moment she detested the man.

"'Oh' isn't much of an answer," he reminded her dryly.

"Why do you come to me this way?" she cried irritably. "Why do you talk to me like this?"

"Because I want to know. I want to know if you have changed your mind."

"What if I have?" swiftly, watching him curiously. "Would you be very angry, Justin? Do you . . . care *very* much?"

Instinctively she was seeking to retrieve the situation from its horrid matter-of-fact trend and steep it in the warm dyes of light love-making. But again he was unresponsive.

"Certainly I have the right to know what you plan to do. Will you answer me?"

"You are in a perfectly nasty mood!" she said pettishly. "I am going in, Mr. Haddon."

"In a moment," he informed her equitably. "When I get my answer."

"Then *no!*" she cried angrily. "No and no and no! There, you have it! You are hateful and I never want to see you again. Now will you let me go?"

"No," he told her quietly. "Not yet. And may I suggest that you don't speak quite so loudly? You may change your mind again, you may not want what you say now overheard. Just a lawyer's advice, Miss Daly."

"Let me go," she cried hotly.

"Do you know," he asked evenly, though his cheeks had flushed, "what a contract is?"

"Some day, when I need to know," she retorted, "I'll have a lawyer of my own to attend to such matters for me. And it won't be you."

"There are verbal contracts as well as written," he went on. "They are quite as binding. You promised to marry me. There are witnesses that

such an agreement had been entered into. It can be broken only with the consent of both contracting parties. That is the law, Miss Daly."

"Law! What do I care about the law! Do you think you can make me marry you?"

"Yes. I think that I can. I have a very excellent case; I have made it my business to have an excellent case. I shall bring a damage suit if you force my hand. It will get from the courts into the papers."

"You brute!" she flung at him breathlessly. "You great, unthinkable brute!"

"But not unthinking," Haddon told her harshly. "Never that. Not even when, in the first glamour of the thing, you allowed yourself to commit certain little indiscretions which, very innocent of course, will look quite the opposite when the newspapers air them and garble them. Your little secret trip with me last spring . . ."

"Oh!" cried Evelyn, terrified. "Oh!"

"Don't misjudge me, Evelyn," Haddon went on hurriedly, a bit more gently. "I am only trying to show you . . ."

"I hate you." Her cheeks had blanched, her hands looked both white and cold. "And I know what you will do. You will go to Auntie and try to make her make me marry you. And in the end you will make her pay you a lot of money to keep your mouth shut. . . ."

Haddon laughed, an ugly, irritable laugh of strained nerves.

"Your aunt has fifteen million dollars," he said in his old blunt way. "Do you think I

be satisfied with a few miserable thousands when it all should come to you, the whole fifteen millions?"

Evelyn, amazed, moistened her lips and looked at him incredulously.

"You . . . you mean . . ."

"I mean that you are going to marry me and right away. It is the best thing for you; it is also the best thing for me. I love you. You love me as much as you'll ever love anybody."

"I will never marry you," she told him with spirit. She had seen Bond looking toward them. "Never."

For a little Haddon stood regarding her frowningly, his lips compressed tightly. When he did not speak she looked up swiftly, hoping to see a weakening of his attitude. But she saw rather that while he had hesitated the hesitation had been past and that his former stern determination had come back into his eyes.

"Evelyn," he said slowly, "I have something else to say to you. Something which may change the whole of your future life. Something that is going to be a shock to you. I am telling you beforehand that, under your frippery, there is a kind of common sense. If I am mistaken . . ." He threw out his hands and let them fall lax at his sides.

Even at a tense moment like this Evelyn's lively curiosity responded.

"What is it?" The stiffness which she put into her tone only half hid the eagerness.

But now Haddon no longer chose the shortest path to the thing he had to say; now had he and Evelyn

changed rôles, she direct in her inquiry, he circuitous in his reply.

"Evelyn," he said, "the greatest thing in the world . . . do you know what it is? In one of your sentimental moods you'd say, it is love, and you'd know that you were not telling the truth. The greatest thing in the world is happiness. Maybe some poor, half-witted fools get it through love. But you and I and people like us, sensible people, get it just one way, by buying it, by paying for it. We get it with money. That brings whatever we want, power, clothes, servants, luxuries, everything. If your aunt decides to leave you fourteen or fifteen millions you'll have everything in the world you want, won't you?"

"Money is *not* everything," said Evelyn with something of the grand air, quite ready to make light of a thing which she considered as already as good as her own.

"With those millions," went on Haddon, "you can have your city house and your country house, your yachts on eastern lakes and rivers, your place in society, your cars, your dresses, your diamonds, your servants by the score. You have perhaps thought of these things more than once? Have you ever thought of what life would be like if you didn't get those millions?"

Evelyn started.

"What do you mean?" she asked, vaguely alarmed.

"I mean that what I am saying to you is for you and me alone to know. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Go on!"

"You know that last winter Mrs. Stetheril made a second will?"

"Yes. But . . ."

"That after a lifetime of hard years she had begun to soften toward her own flesh and blood? That she had me look for her grandson . . ."

"But you yourself told me, you told her, that you had found that he was dead! You . . . you . . ."

"I lied!" announced Haddon curtly. "For your sake and my sake and the sake of the Stetheril millions, I lied. He is alive. And I could reach out my hand and find him. I could bring him here. Do you see all that I could do?"

Evelyn stared at him, her lips parted to her quick breathing.

"Auntie would leave everything to him?" she whispered.

Haddon bowed, his eyes hard upon hers.

"You know all about the second will!" he said quietly.

Evelyn stared at him like one stricken dumb. Bond, so lively a memory a brief second ago, was forgotten, her anger toward Haddon was forgotten, Haddon's threat was as though it had never been made. The one essential thing occupying the whole of her mind was that there was another than she who might inherit the Stetheril millions, a young man, a man in whose blood was the direct strain of Rachel Stetheril's blood.

From the beginning she did not doubt Haddon's word. She knew it for the truth. She did not ask how he knew; that did not matter. So she merely stared at him dumbly.

"You are no fool, Evelyn," said Haddon coldly. "And neither am I. You could do a whole lot worse than marry me; I don't see how you could do any better. You will need someone always to manage so large a fortune for you and you know that I can do it. Yes, better than Bond. For I have been in touch for years with your aunt's methods, her investments; I can carry on everything just as she is doing. Now, will you marry me? Right away?"

Then at last Evelyn spoke quickly, saying:

"Auntie doesn't know?"

"No. No one knows. Not even her grandson. And, just as soon as I am sure of you, I will get him out of the way. For good!"

"Out of the way!" gasped Evelyn. "You . . . you don't mean that . . . that . . ."

Again he laughed harshly.

"Nothing quite so lurid or tragic or . . . romantic," he half sneered. "You will remember, perhaps, that when Mrs. Stetheril deputized me to find him if he were alive, she said she didn't care a hang what sort he was, she was going to make amends to him and his mother by making him her heir? Well, when I found him I discovered that he was . . . a thief!"

"A thief!"

"But young and with an infernally smooth and actually likable way with him. I knew what Rachel Stetheril would do if I produced him; she'd find lawyers to twist and manufacture evidence, she'd bribe judges with half her fortune, she'd make a thief her heir! She's mad enough to do it. And so, before she knows, if she ever does know, he'll be

where he won't trouble us and where even she can't get at him! I am going to send him to the penitentiary for ten years and maybe twenty. That is, my dear Evelyn, if . . ."

"I . . . I . . . Oh, my God!" panted Evelyn.

It was Haddon who shrugged.

"It is in your hands now," he said coolly. "Marry me and of course you know I'll keep my mouth shut. Refuse to marry me and I go straight to your aunt. Which is it?"

"I . . . I . . . Oh, Justin," she pleaded. "You make it so hard for me. I am only a girl and . . . Oh, I don't know what to do!"

"Decide. It should be simple! Marry me, become very rich in your own name, free all of your life if you like, with no social ambition too high for you. Or be a fool. Which is it?"

"You must give me time, Justin. You must."

He shook his head.

"I have no time to give you. There is not a day, not an hour to be wasted. You must tell me now."

She bit her lips and stared away across the garden. Bond was looking at her curiously. She did not see him. She saw nothing but a chaotic future hurtling down upon her, demanding that her own hand set it all in order. After a long time her answer came brokenly.

"I . . . I always meant to . . . marry you, Justin," she said faintly.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO CRACK A SAFE . . . OR RUN?

IN the Springtime one is aware of a very great number of natural phenomena which at any other season of the year would appear little less than the manifestations of sheer magic. Now is the time of birth and rebirth, borne in on the high tide of Youth Triumphant. Now Youth "seizes fortune by the beard and demands joy like a right." The old wornout world is made over into a fragrant, fresh new world of infinite promise. Nature, who has slept, stirs and awakens; sensations, emotions which have lain quiescent thrill through with sudden fire. It is the time for buds to burst through their silken covers, for birds to mate. It is the easiest time in all of the calendar to fall in love.

Bobbie Ashe, looking deep into Enid's eyes, saw that they were like no other eyes in all the world. They brimmed full of youth like the youth singing through his blood; they shone with a new-found happiness; they were made of tender smiles; deep in their depth was a lure to which the very soul of him harkened.

Utterly was she desirable. A sense of absolute content pervaded his whole being when he was with

her, as now; strange loneliness and emptiness made him restless when they were not together. If only they could go on forever so! If only, as days came and went, he could always know that he could put out his hand and touch her, could bring that quick smile into her eyes, that flush into her cheeks, could coax from her her gay laughter! He wanted to cry out to Time, "Stop!" He wanted to go neither forward nor backward; he wanted to be marooned with her eternally upon the green isle of the present in this vast blue sea of quiet peacefulness.

If a good fairy had appeared suddenly before him, saying, as good fairies are said to do, "Make three wishes and they shall be granted!" he could have made the first two in a flash. He would have said:

"Give me Her! Give us a little farm here in the valley so that I may work for Her."

"The third wish?" the Fairy would have said.

And Bobbie Ashe, smiling at her, must have cried:

"Give that to some poor rich man, to some successful statesman, to some reigning monarch, . . . to anyone who needs it. I don't!"

But, as he and Enid sat silent in the summer-house, it was no good fairy with the proverbial three wishes who came to them, but Justin Haddon in an ugly mood, saying curtly:

"Steele, I want to talk with you. Come to our rooms immediately."

It was clearly in Ashe's mind to refuse to obey so peremptory an order; it is as certain that his eyes snapped back his answer to Haddon, saying as curtly as the lawyer had spoken, "Go to the devil!"

He wasn't Haddon's hireling after all; and if his welfare depended upon Haddon, no less then did Haddon's plans pivot upon him.

But the lawyer had not waited even for the look. Enid, however, got to her feet and went to find Ronnie.

"We'd better go in, too," she said lightly. "Ronnie needs a bath. Ronnie, you little rascal, how do you manage to get so dirty and the puppy stay so clean?"

Ashe stood looking at her and at Ronnie; he had scarcely glanced toward the swiftly-departing figure of Haddon.

"Will you do something for me, Miss Enid?" he said abruptly.

"Why, of course," she answered, coming back to him with Ronnie in tow, who in turn was towing the puppy. "What is it?"

"Come out with me just after dinner? Please. I want to talk with you."

"I'll have to put Ronnie to bed. . . ."

"But that'll take only a minute. I'll wait that long!"

"And maybe Mrs. Stetheril will need me. . . ."

"I'll wait *that* long, too. You will come, won't you?"

"It is something tremendously important, no doubt," laughed Enid.

"Tremendously," he told her quite seriously. She looked at him swiftly, curiously. His eyes were as serious as his voice had been.

"Yes. I'll come," she promised. And then, while she and Ronnie and the puppy ran a race to

the house, Ashe followed moodily, his eyes frowning. A moment ago the world had been just a green island in a blue sea; now it was chaotic. Just now Ashe's heart had been surcharged with tenderness; now it was bitter with the anger in it.

"Damn him!" the boy muttered. "Damn him!"

Defiance stood high in his eyes, gleaming coldly when he came to Haddon, defiance stiffened his carriage and held his head high. He, who had always hunted alone, he who had always been his own master, he who had defied all law, who had been preeminently a lover of his freedom, was little less than a slave . . . slave to such as Justin Haddon, plain country lawyer! Must he come because Haddon summoned? Must he steal because Haddon ordered? Must he prepare for flight because Haddon said, "Run"?

Here was Bobbie Ashe, a brief time ago the debonair, lawless, joyous Ladyfingers of San Francisco, stepping out this way or that because Justin Haddon gave the word; Bobbie Ashe, who had held a whole police force in scorn, who had snapped his fingers at threats, who had laughed at warnings, who had been no whit less free than the birds of the air. His face was dark, very dark, as he confronted him who sought to be his master. Without warning a madness such as he had never known leaped into his blood; slowly his two fists clenched; a strange shiver ran through his taut muscles. With a physical effort he held himself back.

"Haddon," he said, his voice low and vibrant, "take a tip from me and don't drive me too hard today."

"You fool," snarled Haddon, his own mood scarcely less tense than Ashe's. "You infernal fool! If you try to pull back . . . By God! I've a notion to land you in jail right now!"

"Jail," said Ashe quietly. "Jail."

Slowly he forced the hot anger out of his brain. It had no place there. He was a fool; only fools surrendered to such madness as had just almost overpowered him. He cleared his mind gradually by sheer force of will. Again he looked at Haddon coolly.

Haddon must not be considered as a man, as an individual personality. He must be looked upon merely as a piece in a game, an opposing rook in chess, something to study thoughtfully, foreseeing all possible moves so that they might be anticipated. Ashe had always gloried in the great game, the game of life; now, that one of its crises had come to him, was the time for skill, not for blind rage. He laughed lightly, took up his gift pipe, and made himself comfortable in his favorite chair. Haddon's eyes followed his every move intently.

"I accept the epithet," he announced cheerfully. "I was acting rather like a fool. Let's cut out the heroics and get down to business."

Haddon's grunt bespoke his satisfaction.

"You understand, of course, that our plan for tonight must be changed?"

"Since Mrs. Stetheril has been before us in looting the bank," nodded Ashe.

"You know, too, that she has withdrawn a very large amount of cash. You know what she has done with it."

"She has put it," smilingly offered, "into a steel box which is very improperly called a safe. Here in the house."

"Tonight . . ." said Haddon, and paused.

"Tonight?" Ashe prompted him.

"Damn it!" muttered the other. "What more do you want? You couldn't ask for anything better. Bring me ten thousand, here. Take the rest . . . keep it. God knows there's enough there to keep you for the rest of your life, if you like. I don't care what you do with it. But I do care what you do with yourself. Get out of the country! Go to New York; go to London; go to hell! But, from tonight on, keep out of my way!"

Ashe, watching him like a hawk, made a swift revision of his conception of the man's character. Haddon was mediocre in most things; but, like other ordinary men, was capable at moments of rising above his mediocrity.

"It will be just as well," continued Haddon, "if we don't see too much of each other from now on. You will open the safe tonight; choose your own time. The house is always quiet by eleven o'clock. You will then come here and give me ten thousand dollars; then you will lose no time in clearing out if you know black from white. I am going into Lockworth now on business; I shall not be back until time for dinner."

He took up his hat and went to the door. As an afterthought he added significantly,

"It strikes me that your one chance lies in playing square with me."

Ashe watched him go out, watched the door close

softly, and then lighted his pipe. For a long time he sat still, smoking slowly.

"My one chance," he said to himself over and over. "My one chance. Have I a single chance in the world?"

For no longer was he content to snatch at the purse dangling from fortune's belt, and to run with it. He didn't want the purse; he didn't want to run. He wanted to stay here; he wanted to see Enid tonight and again tomorrow morning. He didn't want to plunge back into the city game of hide and seek with the police; he did want to linger on and on here in Arcadia.

As he sat thinking his heart was bitter within him. He had always vaunted himself upon his ability to cope masterfully with the situations growing out of his own misdeeds; he had always taken but the keener joy in the great game when the odds piled up. And now, now that the supreme crisis had come, he sat lost in indecision, blind to see the right path out of the maze.

Enid was downstairs. Haddon, Rachel Stetheril, the Stetheril money, were all downstairs. They were all pieces in the game. He loved Enid . . . should he run away from her, out of her life for all time? Rachel Stetheril had been good to him, she had remembered his birthday, he experienced for her an odd sort of affection . . . should he, who had never betrayed a friend, rob her? Haddon he hated in this fit of rebellion . . . should he obey Haddon and do Haddon's will?

What sort of look would come into Enid's eyes tomorrow when she learned that he was Lady-

fingers, the San Francisco thief? When she understood that he had gone straight from her to the commission of a fresh crime? What look would come into Rachel Stetheril's eyes?

"And what," he asked himself with a queer pang, "will little Ronnie think about it all? Good little old Ronnie!"

The thing must be done tonight . . . and even yet he did not know what he should do. He was seeking so hard to do the right thing, the thing which he must never regret. In all essentials he believed himself the same Ladyfingers with few scruples, who had ever gone about his misdeeds joyously. There had come about no upheaval in his character. He was what he had always been, a thief. He had no thought of being anything else. His old code had in no wise been revised. He looked upon life as he had always done. He was considering now no ethical question, no moral. He was merely seeking the wise thing to do.

No change within him, he told himself. It was merely that new factors had come into his life, making of its former simplicity a great complexity. He had always taken the thing he wanted; he sought now to take the thing he wanted. What was it? It was dual now; it was a wonderful life composed of a girl and freedom. How have them both? How have either unless he did as Haddon directed? And then . . . Yes, then it was clear to him that his love of freedom was no longer the greatest love in his heart.

Here was the point at which he must begin in seeking to work out the riddle his destiny and him-

self had made for him: The thing he wanted most, the thing he loved most, was a girl. All of his calculations must be builded upon that one fact. Young love is love with wings. It passes over obstacles; it soars to the rare atmosphere of great heights. It is a strange composite of timidity and daring. Essentially it is optimistic. It does not pause to ask, "Does she love me?" It looks forward eagerly to the awakening of her love, born in some past incarnation lived long ago. It must be that this newly awakened love is a deathless attribute; it must be that it has always been. It must be that, like happiness, "it was born a twin."

Why had he come into Enid's life if it were not meant that his love should find a complement in hers? A young lover is a young poet. Creation is beautiful and it is perfect. How unlovely, how imperfect, how empty, if She should not love even as he loved!

About this point, the beginning, he revolved a long time. From it he sought to map out the future, that future which he, with divine fire in his blood, was going to shape!

These things stood out clearly. He must obey Haddon or he must disobey him. If he obeyed, then must he become this very night a fugitive not only from the law but from love and Enid. If he refused to do Haddon's bidding, then must he expect to be hailed tomorrow as Ladyfingers, the thief! Then must he expect to be dragged away from Enid and love, to be thrown into prison, to be shut up like a caged animal for years. Yes, this was very, very clear: Obey or defy, he must lose Enid!

Was there no middle course? He who had never sought the calm mean between the tumult of the extremes, sought it now. Was there a middle course?

He felt at bay, with Haddon taunting him and driving him, a trap behind him if he moved backward, a net threatening him if he sprang forward. Again a hot rage kindled in his heart toward the self-made arbiter of his fate. And, like a blinding flash across his eyes, came a vision, a vision of Haddon, punished. Only Haddon stood in his way; what right had any man on God's earth to block his path thus, to drive him to his undoing? For the first time in his life he felt that he could kill.

Here was a struggle between him and Justin Haddon, a strife of Haddon's own seeking. Haddon, who stood in his way, must step out. The man must understand, Ashe would tell him, that he must step out. Haddon sought to ruin him; Ashe had his inviolable right of self-protection. He would warn Haddon that he would not be driven. If Haddon refused to take the warning . . .

It would be murder? No. It would not be murder! If a man attacked you upon the street, in your own house, a man whom you had never injured, and you struck him down, would that be murder? Ashe, upon many a night's work, fraught with danger, had never carried a weapon with him. If caught he would take his medicine, not kill. But now this was different. . . .

Why be a fool, squandering his precious time seeking to put a name to a thing! He must make up his mind swiftly what to do; then he must do it. It

didn't matter what the world would call it . . . if the world knew.

If the world knew! That meant . . . *if Enid knew!* A sudden tremor ran through the muscles of his body which he had not known were very tense. He saw more clearly now than ever that the name to the deed did not matter, that the thing itself was unthinkably ugly. It was as though he saw it through Enid's clear eyes. If Enid knew! If little Ronnie knew! If even Rachel Stetheril knew!

The tremor upon him grew into a violent fit of shaking. He felt for a brief moment sick and dizzy. He knew now that he could not kill Haddon, that he would not do it, that he must take his chances somehow else, that he must play out his game in his own way. And his way was that of a thief and a gentleman, not of a butcher.

"There is one other thing which I will not do," he told himself fiercely, and then his calm came back to him. "I will not give her up! I will not!"

All about him, hemming him in, were uncertainties like changing shadows; under his feet the shifting quicksands of precariousness. The net snaring him was a terrible fabric, visible and invisible threads intertwined. Not yet could he fully grasp Haddon's motives; nor could he be certain that if he kept faith with Haddon and did his bidding Haddon would not end the matter by handing him over to the police. He did know Haddon better than to trust him. There was a chance here, however. And it seemed that the only certainty anywhere lay in this other thought. If he allowed Haddon to de-

nounce him, then were both Enid and liberty lost. While if he robbed Rachel Stetheril and fled with his pockets full he might keep his freedom . . . and while there was life there was hope. . . . Who knew what the future might hold in its shut hands? He was young; Enid was young. . . .

But again he was going over and over the same considerations caught and spun in a mighty maelstrom. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE BLOOD

THE day was bright and warm with the golden stream of sunshine poured abundantly from the sky's blue bowl; trees and flowers and grasses stood motionless in the still, fragrant air; never a summer cloud dropped its shadow over the broad, fertile acres of the valley. It was one of those perfect days which are like exquisitely executed cameos. And yet in the Stetheril house there was a hush which was almost a palpable thing, a strange silent command for silence, a breathlessness like that of waiting by a sick bed, an atmosphere not unlike that of another sort of day when thick clouds gather ominously and the air is charged with electrical menace, when it is with a sigh of relief that one hears the first big drops of the thunder-storm.

One of those times had come when one cannot but realize that each human personality walks abroad clothed in its own aura, as in an invisible garment. From a joyous soul there spring outward widening rings of joyousness so that they carry their golden essence into other souls. From the soul steeped in gloom there filters the black ooze of despondency. Today a strong pervading influence of hush and expectancy was no less real than the objective world over which it lay. Even the

servants, coming and going about their work, were a silent-footed, quiet-tongued throng.

Evelyn, since she had left Haddon, had been restless, restless, restless. She beat like mad at the keys of the piano so that for a little the rumble of the bass notes made it seem as though a thunderstorm had actually broken passionately from the blue sky. Suddenly, from the swelling volume of sound, there grew again empty silence as Evelyn's hands dropped listlessly from the keyboard. She went abruptly to her own room in which for ten minutes she moved aimlessly up and down. She called Browdy and sent her for Mr. Haddon. She must speak with him again. No sooner had Browdy gone than Evelyn regretted that she had sent her. And when the maid brought word that Mr. Haddon had gone into Lockworth her impatience to see him, to talk with him further, swept back upon her feverishly.

Bobbie Ashe in his room, tossed mentally in his seething maelstrom, was as restless. He stared moodily out of his window, smoked savagely, let his pipe die out, struggling in a fierce frenzy to get solid ground under his feet.

In the kitchen, cook and serving maid stared at each other out of anxious eyes.

"I feel all the time," whispered the cook, "like every piece of wood I poke in the stove was a stick of dynamite."

For Rachel Stetheril, too, was anxious and nervous and restless, finding fault everywhere at the same time, cursing man and maid, thumping her old stick with a viciousness which caused those who

heard to shiver and, shivering, get out of her way with incredibly soft-footed haste. Even Enid's bright happiness of the morning waned, growing as the afternoon wore on from quiet content to wordless wistfulness. Little Ronnie's tears came readily and frequently today.

The afternoon dragged on lingeringly; the house clocks ticked with pronounced distinctness as though they mocked the painful progress of a dumb and wounded day. The afternoon's passing seemed like a pretty child's dying.

"Where's Haddon?" demanded Rachel Stetheril for the dozenth time, now of Ashe whom she had summoned sharply to her study.

And when the boy answered as others had done before him, saying, "In Lockworth, I believe," the old woman for the dozenth time snapped,

"Damn the man!"

Now she followed the caustic words with a sharp, gimlet sort of look at Ashe.

"What's he in Lockworth for?" she probed viciously.

Ashe turned his eyes, troubled eyes, upon her, and for the moment made no answer. He didn't seem to be thinking either of her or of Haddon or of anything else under the sun.

"Why, I suppose . . . He went on business."

"What business? Whose business? Not mine, I'll be bound."

"I don't know," said Ashe absently.

"Don't know!" rasped the old woman. "Don't know! You don't know anything. You look like a cursed empty-headed owl! Go outside and hoot

. . . Good God! How can I do the right thing when . . . Oh! Get out of here. Go outside and make eyes at the moon or that little fool Camden girl or . . . Steele! Have you got any sporting blood in you?"

"Just how do you mean that, Mrs. Stetheril?"

"Have you ever gambled, gambled big with . . . with Life and Hope and all that they mean? You're just a kid and yet . . . Have you ever taken chances, big chances?"

"Yes," he answered quietly.

"Why?" The question came like a pistol shot.

"Because I guess it *is* in one's blood. And because . . . oh, well, it's the only way of getting a thing sometimes. The thing you want."

Even now she had caught only the skirts of his interest. He supposed that she was thinking of some big deal, of a bit of speculation in land or stocks. . . .

"Steele," she said, and even through his abstraction there penetrated to him a strange gentleness and yearning which made him wonder, "I guess it *is* in the blood . . . in the Stetheril blood. I am going to take my chance today, the big, big chance. And . . Oh, I pray God that now He will be merciful."

Her eyes were bright but they were no longer hard. They were wistful, like her voice. He had never seen her quite this way before. While he could not understand the emotion which filled her he could not fail to feel something of it.

"I hope," he began, "with all of my heart I hope that . . ."

"Have I been unthinkably hard and harsh and . . . mean?" she asked quietly. "Have I succeeded in making life pretty miserable for you?"

He smiled at her, his eyes as gentle as hers.

"You have been very good to me," he told her. "When you have scolded me the hardest I have felt almost as though you were mothering me. And my birthday . . . you would never let me speak of it. . . ."

"You may speak of it now, if you wish," she said slowly.

"You made me think of my mother. You made me want to cry. You made me wish that life had been different somehow. You made me love you. I can't say it so that you will understand. I am afraid that you will misunderstand. If you had left on my table a check for ten thousand dollars I would just have wondered. But when you thought of a pair of slippers and a dressing gown . . . I wanted to hug you. I . . ."

But he had said all that there was to be said. For a moment as they stood looking into each other's eyes they came very close to understanding each other, he little more than a youngster, she so very old.

"My boy," she said, turning back to her paper-strewn table, "I am going to tell you something. Tomorrow. I'll not need you any more today. Go find Enid. Tell her I want some fresh flowers in the house. Help her get them . . . thousands of them!"

He bowed and left her. Until he found Enid he was thinking of Rachel Stetheril, thinking how

little he understood her. It seemed at times as if she were a walking personification of wisdom; as if she knew everything. But when he came upon Enid where Rachel Stetheril had already sent her, he thought only of a girl, of today with her, of tomorrow without her.

Through the late afternoon, into the early dusk, he and Enid and little Ronnie wandered through the gardens, cutting flowers. The nervauric atmosphere brooding over the house followed them a little out here, softened more and more by the fragrance and peacefulness of the unclouded outdoors. Ronnie soon found the puppy and deserted them. When he had gone Ashe and Enid were silent for the most part, and more than once Enid sighed, not knowing it, and more than once Ashe, thinking of tomorrow, sighed.

At dinner silence was the unbidden but not unwelcome guest. Haddon had not returned. Evelyn was preoccupied and nervous. Rachel Stetheril did not seem to note what was put before her and did not once lift her voice to find fault. Ashe's eyes were with his thoughts upon Enid. Now and then Enid, seeing his look, smiled at him.

"When Haddon comes in," Rachel Stetheril said to Carter, "send him to me. No matter what time it is."

And Evelyn, finding Carter a little later, said hastily,

"When Mr. Haddon returns, Carter, please tell him I want to see him."

But Bobbie Ashe who, after all, was chiefly concerned in the actions of Justin Haddon was not even thinking of him. He was in the garden again,

waiting for Enid. And as soon as Ronnie was tucked in, she came out to him.

The world about them was sweet with stars and flowers and budding trees. As the girl came out of the house and down the broad steps she seemed to him a slender princess born to reign over just such tender nights as these. He sought eagerly for her eyes in the shadow of her hair.

They didn't speak as, side by side, they strolled through the roses. They had spoken already in silence. The man's blood was riotous; in the girl's heart was a wild sweetness. The supreme and ineffable moment of life may not come all unheralded. They looked into each other's eyes and looked away. They moved on and as they went their hands at their sides brushed lightly. Again came the thrill of the contact, tingling through them

Ashe had meant first to tell her many things of himself, almost to tell her good-by even before he said, "I love you." He was going to say, "I am going away tomorrow. But first, Enid, dear, . . . Oh, Enid, dear, dear Enid, I love you so!" But it happened otherwise. They walked on in the silence, wordless. And after a little they stopped. Again they stood looking into each other's eyes. Enid saw that his eyes were on fire; he saw that her lips were parted a little, that they were trembling all of a sudden.

Slowly he lifted his hands from his sides, lifted them so that his two arms were outstretched toward her. Just the one gesture, mute and eloquent. And Enid, seeing, stood stiff and rigid; Enid, loving him even as he loved her, held back. But she was

shaking now and he saw that she was. He came closer and she did not draw away. Gently, tenderly, he put his arms about her.

"Enid," he whispered. "Enid!"

Love's magic transmuted her name into the golden avowal. He had said "Enid!" his lips at her hair, and in her soul she had heard the echoing whisper "I love you!" the three little words from which are sprung the whole world, the universe and heaven and hell.

She was in his arms, neither unyielding nor yielding. Her body was quivering; he could feel the hurried beating of her heart.

What had he said long ago to Polly Le Brun? "She'll be a great lady, Polly!"

And what had Polly, the skeptical, answered? "You're just the kind to fall for some haymaker's daughter chewing a straw and feeding the chickens!"

And there had come to him neither the one nor the other, but just a girl. A girl whose soft red lips his were stooping to kiss; whose hands were like warm caresses, whose eyes were the glorious grey eyes of Her. That most wonderful thing in all the world, just a girl.

With her, no matter what happened, Bobbie Ashe meant to "play square." If he gave of his love fully he must as unstintedly show her his true self; if he were to accept the love which she was offering him it must be under no false pretenses. But her lips were warm upon his now and her arms were at last about his neck and no longer was she unyielding. And now, to say rudely, "I am that Ladyfingers, a Thief!" would be to strike her across the uplifted face.

But tonight lay before him, and not yet did he see clearly the thing to do; tomorrow would rise like a wall built up between him and her.

Before they said good night, lingeringly, like all other young lovers, he said to her:

"Enid, would you give yourself to me upon the little that you know of me?"

"Yes," she said quite simply. "And after all, you know quite as little of me!"

"Then do this one thing for me! Wait for me! There is something going to happen, dear, which cannot be stopped. I cannot even tell you of it now. I suppose it will make you unhappy; it has got to do that! But maybe you'll understand more than others . . . because you love me more! And you'll wait, won't you? And in the end, somehow, I'll make you happy again; and I'll tell you everything and . . . and we'll start all over. We'll start all over and not make any mistakes. Oh, if all of my life I'd only known that tonight was coming . . . that you were somewhere and that I should find you. . . ."

"What is it?" she asked with a quick breath.

But he could only shake his head and say:

"You will have to believe the truth . . . because it will be the truth. But you'll have to believe in me a little, won't you? Because we love each other. And somehow it will come out right, somehow. . . ."

That night, before Haddon came in, Bobbie Ashe wrote two letters. One was to Rachel Stetheril one to Enid.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WARNING OF POLLY LE BRUN

"MR. STEELE, sir," asserted Carter with clear distinctness, "Mrs. Stetheril would thank you to come down to her, sir."

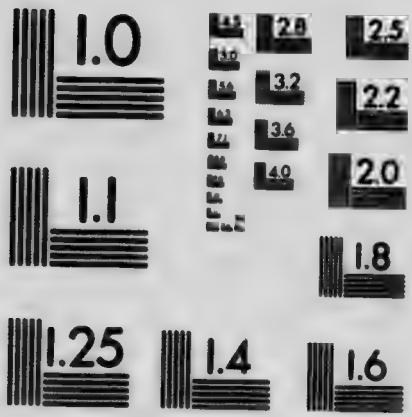
This said he lifted himself upon his toes and looked beyond Ashe toward the closed door of the lawyer's room.

"Mr. Haddon has not yet returned, has he, sir?"

"No," answered Ashe.

"Then, sir," . . . and Carter's left eyelid drooped with an expression of rare cunning while Carter's voice was suddenly lowered to a confidential whisper. . . . "Then, sir, I'd say that it isn't exactly Mrs. Stetheril who'd thank you to come down, sir. Not at all. But a young lady, sir! You were to come out to her in the gardens at the south of the house. Immediately, sir. She put this into my hand and said to me . . . in a sort of excited whisper, mark you . . ."

But Ashe, waiting for no particulars now, failed to see that this was a gold coin. That there was any other young lady in the world than Enid Camden did not suggest itself to him. Carter, looking after his hasty departure, sighed and shook his head.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

"Just like me when I was his age," he meditated. "The very picture. Han'some young dog he is, too. Boys will be boys and girls will be girls and for that matter there's nothing like it."

Bobbie Ashe slipped out of the house unseen and hastened toward the live oak in the southeast corner of the grounds. For in the dim moonlight his eager eyes had caught already something white which might have been a girl's scarf.

"Enid!" he called softly as he came to the slim young figure waiting for him in the shadows. "Is it you?"

"Enid!" The girl spoke the name strangely after a little nervous laugh. "Who's she, Bobbie? The great lady or the haymaker's daughter?"

He stopped very still, staring.

"Polly!" he cried sharply. "You!"

"Polly Me," she retorted in the old lighthearted way. "A girl you used to know a couple of thousand years ago. Remember?"

"But, Polly . . ." he muttered. "What in the world . . ."

"Oh, come alive, Bobbie," she laughed. "Glad to see me or not? You've got a funny way of showing it if you are!"

He came forward then, putting out his hand swiftly.

"Of course I'm glad to see you, Polly," he said heartily, his hand gripping hers. "Only I hadn't any more idea of seeing you when I came out here than of interviewing the king of England."

Polly looked at him a bit wistfully as her hand clung to his. She knew that, if at any instant

during these latter, empty months, she had been told that someone was waiting for her she would have thought of him. In spite of her she gave his hand a quick little squeeze before she drew her own away.

"It's great to see you, Bobbie," she said breathlessly. "The same old Bobbie."

But he, looking down into the eager upturned face, saw that it was not exactly the same old Polly. This was some new Polly masking in the manner of the old. She was nervous, her red mouth had hard, set lines about it, her eyes he thought were anxious.

But in one thing certainly she had not changed, her way of going straight about what she had to say.

"Did you ever dope it out, Bobbie," she said bluntly, "that I slipped you the double cross on that diamond deal? When you had to beat it with Ambrose hot on your trail?"

"What's the difference, Polly?" he returned lightly. "They didn't get me, did they?"

"But you knew?" she insisted.

"Well, then, yes." He hesitated. "I suppose that I did."

"I was a nasty little cat!" she said bitterly. "Honest, I was clean crazy, Bobbie. Oh, I might as well fess up seeing I've come all this way just to try to square myself. And I'm going to square myself proper, just as far as I can. A halfway play makes me sick."

"It's all right, Polly. You'd done me enough good turns . . ."

"Choke it," commanded Polly. "I was a nasty

little cat and that's all there is to it. I don't know what was eating me, Bobbie, but I caught the fool hunch I was dead stuck on you." She laughed with fine scorn, the laugh she had practised over and over to follow this avowal. "Ain't it funny how you don't know what love is until it comes right?" Her sigh was as nicely done as the laugh. "Say, Bobbie, I wish you could meet my friend! He's the han'somest man you ever saw a picture of in a Sunday supplement! He could have any girl he wanted, too. Gee, Bobbie, I'm just crazy about him."

"I'm glad, Polly," said Ashe warmly, rather more warmly than Polly could have hoped for.

"Sure. I knew you'd be glad," she went on quietly. "But I got my speech to say. I hadn't met Jimmie then and I thought I cared like that about you. And I thought that you'd be going away and I'd never see you any more. So I framed it with Ambrose to nab you and shake you down for the ten thousand you'd grabbed and then to turn you loose in the City broke. I thought that that would keep you there and . . . Oh, I said I was a cat, didn't I?"

"If it had to be done all over I'd have it happen just as it did!" he said fervently.

"Well," went on Polly, "I framed you and then I found out the very next morning that while I was doing you dirt you were buying me that car. Spending half your wad on me." Her voice, brave until now, broke suddenly. But before he could speak she ran on swiftly: "You are a good sport, Bobbie, and so am I . . . when I can see straight. I said

that if I never did another thing I'd square myself. I've come to do it now. My car's out there in the road ready to do sixty miles an hour with me driving it. Get your hat on, Bobbie, and beat it with me!"

"Why, Polly . . ."

"I've been playing up to that brute Ambrose," she told him, "ever since I slipped up that way. He's a wise guy all right, but there's a thing or two he don't know. One of 'em is Polly Le Brun. I dug out of town in my car before he'd got his ticket. He's in Lockworth, Bobbie, right now. And we can beat him to it!"

"Ambrose in Lockworth. I see."

The information was no great surprise to him. Haddon was simply seeking to put him into Ambrose's clutch.

"And my car's in the road. Don't forget that. And, Bobbie . . ."

"Yes?"

"While you're grabbing your hat can you manage to touch up the safe here? Oh, I know a good deal about the play! You're going to need a wad of money to keep ahead of Ambrose this trip."

"Just what do you know, Polly? When does Ambrose plan to take me in?"

"You're to crack a safe tonight, ain't you? They're not going to nab you then. You don't find Ambrose making a beef like that! No, his play is to let you get clear of the house with the stuff. Then he throws a gun on you and takes you in on the quiet. While he's doing that he frisks you on the side, lifting the whole wad and getting

it in a safe place. Then, in the morning, you are accused of the burglary and Ambrose says that before he could get his mitts on you you must have hid the money. Then for the next ten years the rubes around here will be digging holes all over the country looking for what Ambrose has slipped into his bank roll. It ain't such a bad play, at that, is it?"

"So that's it," mused Ashe. "Haddon and Ambrose split even and I go to the pen. No; it isn't such a bad play."

Suddenly he swung about and took both of Polly's hands into his, holding them tight.

"You've more than squared yourself, Polly," he said impulsively. "You're a God blessed brick! If you think I'll ever forget what you have done for me. . . ."

"Go get your lid on," she said hastily. "We'll burn up some road between now and daylight. And say, Bobbie, if you can't lift anything in a hurry I've got a roll on me that'll keep you in smokes for a few weeks."

For a moment he hesitated. Then he laughed softly, shaking his head.

"You've done your part, Polly," he told her decidedly. "I am not going to let you in for any more trouble. If Ambrose found out how you've fooled him, if he caught you helping me out of this, he'd get you somehow. You've tipped me off. Now I've got to play this little game out my way."

"Don't be a fool!" she cried, half angrily.

"I'm not such a fool, after all. Ambrose will keep his hands off until I've cracked the safe. I'll

keep my hands off the safe until I get good and ready to tackle it. They'll be watching for me when I come out. And I'll be watching for them!"

And, for all that Polly Le Brun could say, here the matter rested.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE DARKNESS

AT the dinner hour that evening Evelyn Daly had sent her excuses together with word of a headache. While the message was being delivered to the inattentive ears of Mrs. Stetheril, Evelyn herself was going swiftly through the dusk toward the further summerhouse. And, from the depths of her wisdom regarding the genus man, she was prompted to take with her not only various choice delicacies from the cook's larder, but certain thick sandwiches and a bottle of beer. To Bond she appeared as a new sort of angel created for man's delectation here in an earthly paradise.

Haddon, returning about eight o'clock that evening, did not see them though he passed quite close to their trysting place. But they saw him and were silent until he had closed the door after him. Then Bond, seeing that Evelyn was shivering suddenly, put his arm about her. So great was the emotion which Haddon's passing had awakened in her tumultuous breast that she was quite unconscious of Bond's eloquently testified sympathy. When finally she was aware of it the banker's other arm had gone about the same business as the first, and Evelyn said softly, as though she could not believe it at all: "Oh . . . *Arnold!*"

In the hallway, Carter, on guard, came forward to meet Haddon, saying,

"Mrs. Stetheril wishes a word with you, sir."

"What does she want?" asked Haddon quickly.

Carter involuntarily lifted his thin eyebrows.

"Why, sir, as to that I really couldn't say."

"Of course not. I meant to ask, where is she?"

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps in her room. Shall I inquire?"

"Oh, go to the devil!" cried Haddon irritably.

He went down the hall to Rachel Stetheril's study. Before the closed door he paused a moment. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he went in. It was dark; the room was unoccupied. He switched on the lights. His eyes went swiftly to the corner where the steel safe stood. He stood looking at it steadily for several moments. It seemed to fascinate him. It was with a second shrug that he dragged his eyes away.

"And, sir," said Carter from the door behind him, "I was to say from Miss Daly that she'd like to speak with you too, sir."

"Where is *she?*"

"Not being positive I'd say that I rather think in her room, sir. Having complained of a headache . . ."

"You may tell Mrs. Stetheril that I have come in. I am entirely at her service."

Carter bowed and departed. Haddon went to the window and stood looking out, his fingers tugging at his lower lip. He had turned half a dozen times expectantly before Mrs. Stetheril came in.

"You wished to see me?" he asked.

She glared at him from the threshold where she had stopped a moment. Then she came on, passed him, turned and glared at him again.

"I want to see you, yes," she snapped.

Haddon waited. She stood there looking at him strangely, her gaze intent, the old probing look so characteristic of her.

"Hmf!" she said.

Haddon's eyes shifted from hers once; then, with an obvious effort, he brought them back and held them steadily meeting her look. For perhaps ten long seconds they stood thus, confronting each other. It was a brief battle of minds. Not a spoken word until her "Hmf!" ended the interview. She had sought to read what lay hidden in his soul; he had sought to show nothing of it. Her old, wrinkled face had been that of an inscrutable sphinx, never a muscle moving. His lips had twitched, a slight bulging at the corners of his jaws had shown how the teeth were tight clamped. Suddenly she passed him again and went out, muttering to herself.

Fifteen minutes later . . . for he had waited that long, wondering if she was going to come back . . . Haddon went upstairs. Ashe nodded at him pleasantly.

"Well?" demanded the lawyer crisply, but none the less guardedly, "are you ready?"

"I have shaved and combed my hair," Ashe laughed at him. "I have my toothbrush in my pocket and my pipe is filled. As soon as you say the word I am ready."

"Then we needn't do any more talking about it. You'd better get busy about half-past eleven.

The house will be quiet then. You are sure you can open the safe?"

"As easily," the boy retorted coolly, "as you could tell a lie or double cross a pal."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I may be what I may, but that you are a damned crook of the dirtiest brand it has ever been my pleasure to meet. I've been thief and pickpocket and a good many other things for a good many years, but you've been a skunk since you were born. I mean all that and a great deal more. You see," added smilingly, though the young voice was vibrant, "I had to get this out of my system before our paths entirely separated. I have never been either cur or coward; you are both."

"Damn you!" muttered the lawyer. "By God, I've a mind to . . ."

"All of which I think you've said before. In the exact words. Now, see here. You are in a position to dictate to me to a certain extent. That's all. As you said a little while ago, I don't see why we should talk any more about this little matter. Will you go out now, or shall I?"

Ashe's usually clear eyes had darkened and narrowed; the tender mouth nad hardened; the boyish face had grown grim with anger. Haddon's air of menace altered swiftly.

"If you don't play square with me," he said curtly, "so help me God I'll send you to the pen. Remember that!"

Ashe laughed contemptuously. But when Haddon was gone, when he was alone and the door shut, there was no laughter in his eyes. He swung about

and put his elbows upon the table, he let his head fall dejectedly upon his hands. For a long time he did not move. When at last he did get to his feet his eyes were bright, very bright and wet.

"How could You know?" he whispered into the silence. "For You were right! Poor old fool Ladyfingers. He's paying now. He always thought that it would be so easy to be straight if ever he wanted to be straight . . . and already it is too late! And Enid . . . Enid . . ."

But he had had ample time in which to consider his position from all angles and his determination was firmly made. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Wait through the hours which alternately seemed creeping and flying. He was giving up Enid, but not for all time. Surely not for all time. That would be hideously impossible. He had written a letter which he would slip under her door tonight, which she would read the first thing in the morning. She was going to awake with him in her thoughts. His letter would bring sorrow, but she would understand. She would suffer, but she would forgive. She would wait. And some day, some day . . .

Already his clock indicated the eleventh hour of the night. The eleventh hour! His lips tightened grimly. He took up his hat and left the room. Long ago had the big house grown silent. There was no use waiting longer.

He went along the dark hall, down the carpeted stairways, silently. He came to Enid's room and stopped. Upon his knees he slipped the letter under her door. And then, his head again in his hands, he remained very still, kneeling.

"I am coming back," he whispered at last. "I am coming back, sometime, Enid. Good-by, Enid. . . ."

He moved on slowly, cautiously, making no sound. For a little he thought only of Enid, Enid sleeping just yonder. But swiftly his mind switched from her to the immediate, personal danger which he felt to be lurking in the darkness for him. The one thing now was to keep clear of arrest, to keep his freedom so that in the future he might be arbiter of his own fate. Haddon and Ambrose might even now be watching him. Ashe must be ready as well as he might.

He thought of other nights in dark houses, with safes to be opened and a policeman just outside. The silence and obscurity and void about him were familiar. Through a window whose shade had not been drawn he now saw that the night was clear with a moon. Yonder across the hall lay a little patch of light. He must pass through it. He paused, listening.

He was again taking his chance and he knew it, realizing all that it meant. But, though intensified, his sensations were the old, oft-repeated sensations of other chances taken. He was prepared to leap forward or back instantly, to throw himself to right or left, to fight it out, to seek the open by a dash through window or door. His blood was tingling but rather pleasantly now than otherwise. For the moment the emotion standing highest in his breast was one of zest. He was Ladyfingers who had defied such as Lieutenant Ambrose for many years, Ladyfingers the debonair, fearless, confident, and capable.

And while he moved on noiselessly, ready for anything, there was someone quite near him, someone who also was taking her chance. Ashe himself had told her, "Sometimes it's the only way of getting the thing you want." Rachel Stetheril herself, crouching like a thief in a little alcove which looked into the study, waited.

She saw him come to the study door. She was scarcely breathing, her heart was beating wildly, her little old body was shaking pitifully.

"Oh, God!" she whispered over and over, "he is just a boy! And . . . he won't do this thing, he won't! I know he won't!"

She saw that he had paused again, that he appeared to hesitate. He took a step forward and her trembling hands clasped each other tightly, lifted a little as though adding their mute supplication to the quiet prayer of her lips. It was quite dark and yet not the utter blackness to hide his form entirely. She could see that he moved another step, that again he paused. That again he moved . . .

"He is going by!" In the tenseness of the moment her body ceased shaking and grew rigid. "Thank God, he is going by!"

It was so hard there in the darkness to see just what he did! But . . . he had *not* passed on. He seemed again to hesitate, to be listening even as she listened, to be watching as she watched. . . .

He had come into the room. She saw him come forward swiftly now, she even fancied that she saw him lift his shoulders lightly. He had his hat on. He passed between her and a window. He was

going straight to the corner of the room in which the safe stood.

It was upon her lips to call out, "Stop! Don't do this thing!" But she kept her silence. She would wait until the last second, she would not believe until . . .

Ashe was bending over the safe. In the absolute stillness Rachel Stetheril heard the swift, almost noiseless spinning of the knob. She dropped her old face into her shaking hands only to jerk it up again, staring through the darkness, listening, fearing, hoping, she hardly knew what now.

For her eager eyes had seen even in that dim light. Now the door of the safe had swung open in obedience to those slender white hands of his. One of his hands had gone quickly to his pocket. She had seen it in silhouette against the window. The safe had closed again. He was turning away, going back to the door. . . .

Suddenly there was a flash of light and Bobbie Ashe swung about, startled. The room, dark an instant ago, was now flooded with light. He expected to see Haddon confronting him triumphantly, Haddon and Ambrose. And instead he saw Rachel Stetheril as her hand fell away from the electric switch.

"You!" he muttered. "You! Haddon told *you!*"

Even then he realized that in her old eyes there was a look which he had never seen before. There was a yearning that was close to tears, there was

a pain as of a soul in anguish. He did not understand.

He saw the two old hands twisting before her.

"So you are just a thief, just a thief, after all!"

He had never heard her voice like this. It was broken and sad, a hopeless voice of a very old woman who had taken her one chance and lost.

"Yes," he said with sudden bitterness. "I am just a thief after all. Robert Ashe at your service, Mrs. Stetheril. Ladyfingers, if you wish. Just a thief." He made her one of his deep bows.

"Yes," she said wearily, "I know. But I always thought . . . My God! I always hoped that you were a gentleman in spite of it! I was a fool, a miserable fool. I think that you have broken my heart, Robert Ashe."

He stood looking at her wonderingly. He groped blindly for what might lie in her mind.

"It looks," he said quietly, "as though I'd played the losing game. And I'm half glad of it. If . . . if you'll call them in you can get rid of me and get to bed."

"I took my chance," she was saying in the same lifeless monotone. "It was the only way to know if you were utterly contemptible. I can stand a bad man, but not a hypocrite."

Ashe flushed and bit his lip.

"You have been good to me . . ." he began quietly.

But she jerked up her head again and in her eyes was only a burning anger as she cried shrilly:

"Shut up! Talk to me about being good to you and then, the first time you get the chance, rob me!"

"Mrs. Stetheril!" he exclaimed sharply. "I did not rob you!"

"You did!" she snapped hotly. "I saw you!"

"I beg your pardon," he answered. "I did not!"

"What did you take out of my safe then?"

"Nothing!"

"Liar!" she flung at him. "Liar!"

"As you will," he answered coolly. "But . . ."

"This man is my prisoner! Stand where you are, my gay Ladyfingers! So I've got you at last, have I?"

Ashe turned swiftly.

"So," he said briefly, "it's you, is it, Ambrose?"

Lieutenant Ambrose stepped into the room and behind him came Justin Haddon looking pale and anxious eyed. Rachel Stetheril stared at them both with hard, unwinking eyes.

"Who's your friend, Haddon?" she demanded in an ugly voice. "And what in God's name are you up to now?"

"May I introduce him?" asked Ashe imperturbably. "Mrs. Stetheril, Lieutenant Richard Ambrose, distinguished in the San Francisco police and crook circles. Haddon, you are quite the cur I thought you. Ambrose, at your service."

Ambrose, his eyes gleaming, came a step forward, his right hand in his coat pocket, watchful and suspicious.

"This man," he explained to Rachel Stetheril, "is a crook. He is wanted in San Francisco for a good many things. Ever hear of Ladyfingers? Among other things he stole your diamond for you."

Rachel Stetheril went to her chair and sat down.

She looked not at Haddon nor Ambrose, but at Ashe. And he, smiling, met her look steadily. But for all of his composure his heart was sick within him. To be trapped this way, to be dragged away to jail, with Enid under the same roof . . .

Rachel Stetheril was very silent, her wrinkled old face a mask through which her bright, black eyes burned ominously. Her lips were working, but for a little no words came.

"If you hadn't lied to me," she said after a very long silence. "If you hadn't played the hypocrite . . ."

"I didn't lie to you," maintained Ashe stoutly. "To you I have never played the hypocrite. You have been like a mother to me and I have played square with you."

"He's got a glib tongue," grunted Ambrose. "He'll get his chance to talk to the judge. You'll come along with me and not make any trouble, Ashe."

Ashe stared at him insolently.

"What is the charge?" he demanded.

Ambrose laughed tolerantly.

"Standing by all your rights, eh?" he sneered. "Well, then, for the theft of Mrs. Stetheril's diamond."

"That all?" with undisturbed insolence.

"And for burglary. You see, my dear young crook, both Mr. Haddon and myself saw you crack the safe there."

Ashe laughed at him.

"You've got great eyes for seeing in the dark!" he grinned.

"You let that boy go! I don't care the snap of my fingers what he's done!"

"Mrs. Stetheril," said Ambrose, swinging about upon her, "will you open your safe?"

"No!" She was upon her feet again, her outstretched forefinger close under Ambrose's nose. "No! I won't! And you let that boy go! I don't care the snap of my fingers what he's done! I refuse to prosecute! Hear me? *You let him go!*"

Ambrose's stare of astonishment was no more marked than Ashe's. Haddon began to pluck nervously at his under lip.

"Open the safe!" cried Ashe. "Open it!"

"Bluff, curse you," snarled Ambrose. "Much good it'll do you!"

"I won't open it," repeated Rachel Stetheril. "And you won't arrest that boy! Let him go, I tell you! Let him go or I'll have Carter call my servants and chuck you out of the house. Yes, and that infernal sneak Haddon with you! Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," said Ambrose stolidly. "But even you can't do a thing like that. I've got my hands on Robert Ashe and . . ."

"You fool!" she screamed at him. "Who is Robert Ashe? Where is Robert Ashe? That? That is Robert Stetheril Ellis. My great-grandson, if you please. And now that I've got him with God's help or the devil's, I'm going to keep him!"

Ambrose looked at her with sagging jaw. Ladyfingers the great-grandson of Rachel Stetheril of the Stetheril millions? From her he stared at Haddon, whose pallor had deepened.

As for Bobbie Ashe, for a moment he was stupe-

fied. And then quick, hot tears sprang into his eyes. To him it was so simple, so futile, so pathetic. The old woman meant to save him even now, and so . . .

But was the thing so futile after all? If she meant to save him, why then what was impossible? And not yet had she opened the safe! It was incredible, but . . .

"Mrs. Stetheril," he cried out to her impetuously. "I give you my word that I have not taken a thing from your safe. Open it!"

She turned upon him slowly and for a long time stood looking deep into his eyes, the muscles of her wrinkled old face working pitifully.

"If you are telling me the truth . . ."

She went to the safe and in a little jerked open the door. Ambrose and Haddon and Ashe were standing close, watching. There in plain sight was a great, thick pad of bills. By them was a bit of folded note paper. The old woman snatched it up with shaking fingers. While Ambrose stared blackly at Haddon and Haddon seemed like a man with the ground swept suddenly from beneath him, she read the few lines eagerly: Bobbie Ashe's short, simple letter of farewell to an old woman who had been kind to him and whom he loved. And then she had thrown both of her arms about Ashe's neck and was crying and hugging him convulsively.

"Oh, thank God, thank God!" she murmured over and over.

"Mrs. Stetheril," Ashe said softly. "You had better . . ."

But she held him off a little from her and the

tears were running down her wrinkled cheeks as she admonished him:

"Can't you call me Grandma, Bobbie, dear? Can't you?"

Ambrose, his face red with fury, swung about upon Haddon.

"What in hell's name have you got me into?" he muttered.

Haddon found no immediate answer. Ambrose, in no mood to be baffled utterly, cried out angrily:

"Mrs. Stetheril, I'm sorry, but I've got to take him in. Just your calling him your grandson doesn't make him so. And, if he was foxy enough to pass up this chance to steal, he's still got that diamond charge to answer to."

"If you want to know anything about that diamond matter," she said bluntly, "you just ask Haddon there. Ask him who picked it up when Bobbie dropped it! And now, listen to me. Both of you! Bobbie here is my grandson and what is more I can prove it. Ask Haddon about that! If you two crooks get out of here right this minute and keep going and never let me see either one of you again there'll be nothing further said about that diamond. You can keep it. If you try to make trouble I'll send Haddon to the penitentiary for that and for some other crooked work. If you, Ambrose, get out and keep your mouth shut, you can make Haddon whack with you. Stay here and you'll get nothing but trouble and a lot of it! I guess you know something about Rachel Stetheril, don't you? Now . . . *get out!* . . . Oh, *Robert!*"

She had forgotten them. Her arms were about

him, her tear-stained face was looking up at him, her eyes filled with the hunger of love, with happiness, with pride!

"I *knew* you couldn't really be dishonest!" she laughed up at him delightedly. "Wild, maybe. All Stetherils are wild. I'm wild myself!"

CHAPTER XXVII

POLLY LE BRUN SQUARES THE GAME

JUSTIN HADDON, having much at stake, comported himself like an able general. With forethought and care he had massed his attack, and now saw it being swept back. He retreated promptly. Now he must save himself; later he could strike again, from ambush, a flank movement. So far, nothing had been lost save honor.

Now, more clearly than ever, he saw his salvation in Evelyn Daly. Ashe might or might not escape prosecution and an ultimate conviction; Evelyn might or might not come to stand foremost in Rachel Stetheril's will. But, in any case, Evelyn was the old woman's kinswoman and so would not be utterly forgotten.

Haddon cursed himself now for his single blunder. When Ashe upon the night of the attempted diamond robbery had dropped the stone, it had been Haddon's instinctive thought to snatch it up, to return it to the owner. Then a woman had screamed, "He has stolen her diamond!" and, turning to show the thing in his palm, he had seen that all eyes were upon the dark figure running through the shrubbery. He had swung quickly upon Mrs. Stetheril; her eyes were upon the fugitive. It seemed at first incredible, then perfectly natural. Perhaps because

he wanted it to seem natural. He had convinced himself that no one had seen him retrieve the fallen jewel. He dropped it into his pocket.

But all of the time that inscrutable old woman had known. She had known who Ashe was. She had known that Justin Haddon was a traitor to her interests. Now she would make him pay. In one way or another, no doubt in all possible ways, she would exact payment in full. Unless he outwitted her now and speedily.

He withdrew swiftly and silently, trusting that his departure would be unnoticed. And so would it have been had not Lieutenant Ambrose's steely eyes followed him. Haddon, once that he was in the hallway, hurried to Evelyn's room. As he went a glance at his watch showed him that it was not yet half-past eleven. Perhaps she had not yet gone to bed.

Nor had she. He saw the light under her door, heard her moving about restlessly. It was not meant that she should sleep tonight. There was Arnold Bond to think about and Justin Haddon in the new rôle of master of her fate; yes, and the terrible possibility of another than herself falling heir to the Stetheril millions. She started at Haddon's knock. And when he rapped again she asked sharply:

"Well? Who is it?"

"Haddon," answered the lawyer, his lips close to the door. "I must see you immediately, Evelyn."

"Justin? What is it? At this hour . . ."

"Never mind the hour!" he urged her. "You are dressed?"

"Yes. I . . ."

"Put on your hat and coat and come out to me in the gardens. Come the back way and don't let anyone see you. And hurry, Evelyn, hurry or it will be too late. I'll be waiting for you."

She jerked open the door, but Haddon had gone toward the dining room, not turning to see if she followed. She looked down the hall toward the front of the house. There were voices, Rachel Stetheril's and Mr. Steele's, both obviously strongly moved. And the house had been so still only a moment ago.

Hastily the girl drew on a coat, caught up a scarf, and went out. A glance over her shoulder showed her someone standing by the door of Mrs. Stetheril's study, a man whom she had never seen before. Was this man her cousin? Was he going to come between her and the fortune which she had so long looked upon both as a right and a necessity? What did Justin plan to do?

When she passed through the great dining room, Evelyn was running. A door, flung widely open, gaped after her. She was breathless, flushed, and eager when she came upon Haddon outside.

"What is it?" she cried anxiously. "Is it that man in there?"

"Evelyn," said Haddon with quiet emphasis, "we haven't much time for talking. It's too late for that now; the time has come for action. I have already ordered out a car. You are going with me into Lockworth."

"Lockworth!" She stared at him in amazement. "At this time of night! Justin, tell me! What has

happened? What are we going to do in Lockworth?"

"Nothing has happened . . . yet," he lied promptly. "A great deal is going to happen. In Lockworth, just as fast as I can get a couple of men out of bed, you and I are going to get married!"

"Married!" she gasped. "Married!"

"Yes, married," he told her steadily. "Marry me tonight and I'll save you your rightful fortune. Hesitate and you lose it. Oh, I'll explain as we drive into town. But you've got to make up your mind."

"But, Justin, I don't understand. . . ."

"I do. I tell you that I am the one man in the world who can arrange matters so that you inherit your aunt's money. If I do anything for you I've got to do it now, tonight. And," doggedly, "I won't turn a hand unless you marry me immediately."

"But, Justin, . . . I . . . I can't! Not this way. . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned as to reenter the house. She clutched at his sleeve.

"Wait! Wait, Justin. I . . . Oh, I can't *think!*"

"Won't you let me do the thinking, Evelyn?" he asked more softly. "You know how I love you. Everything I am doing is for your sake, dear."

Ambrose, watching them from the shadows about the porch, was in no position to understand what the undercurrent might be. But he had no intention of losing sight of Haddon just now. Haddon had already ordered a car; Ambrose had seen one standing in the road in front of the house. It had

been there when they came in. Haddon had not said *when* he had ordered it out. Ambrose made the natural mistake and, slipping quietly through the shrubbery, went around the house, meaning to intercept Haddon and Evelyn there and to go with them into Lockworth.

"I'll get more out of him than out of that old woman," he told himself with a measure of complacency. "I'll make him cough up the whole damned thing. God knows I need it!"

But, before he had come to the big French car he had come upon the owner of it and the French heels. He and Polly Le Brun met face to face as each, moving quietly, came about a corner of the house.

"Polly!" exclaimed Ambrose. "You here!"

"Yes," returned Polly in her most impudent manner. "It's little Me. How's tricks, Dickie?"

But Ambrose's face, at first showing merely the start of his surprise at finding her here when she should naturally be in San Francisco, indicated now a black and blacker rage.

"Curse you!" he snarled at her. "Still stuck on Ladyfingers, are you? You've been dead stuck on him all the time, lying to me. . . . And you've come up here to tip him off. . . ."

He lifted his hand as though he would strike her down. Polly's eyes, bright and fearless, told him frankly now of the scorn of him which had so long lain hidden in her soul.

"Gee," she laughed at him contemptuously, "you're the swell guesser, ain't you?"

"It's the truth, then?"

"Sure, it's the truth. I don't have to lie to you

any longer. Thank God for that! You don't know how many times I had to go and throw up after I'd got through talking with you!"

"You've seen him already tonight?"

"You're guessing fine," she sneered at him. "Go on."

Had his eyes not been in the shadow then, little Polly Le Brun, fearless as she was, might have drawn back from him. They were brimming with anger, hatred, and the glittering, evil jealousy which made them deadly, like poison. The man's voice was suddenly husky when he spoke again.

"I'll get you for this," he muttered. "You and him. If I never do another thing in all my life, I'll get the two of you. If I can't do it any other way I'll get you with my hands!"

And, as though no longer could his rage hold itself in check, his two hands shot out, gripping her shoulders. A moment he held her thus, so that her face went white and she flinched from him. Then brutally he flung her from him, laughing softly as her body struck against the house.

"You great big brute," she snapped at him. "You'd maul a woman, but you'd be scared to kill her. Scared of some other boob in uniform dragging you away, scared of the rope at San Quentin. . . . You'd be scared to kill a chicken if it was against the law! You coward! You make me sick!"

Under the whip of her contempt Ambrose cried out harshly,

"Scared, am I? Afraid to kill, am I? Didn't I . . ."

And there he stopped suddenly, and though there

was just the moonlight streaming upon his face, for his hat had fallen, Polly saw the look which had come into the man's eyes.

"My God!" cried the girl, gasping out the words. "It was you?"

"What do you mean?" he challenged, again standing over her.

"It was you!" she repeated, half in wonder, half in horror. "It never was Tony the Car You killed papa!"

"You fool!" cried Ambrose, again shaking her in his whitening hands. "You little fool! Keep your mouth shut. Do you understand? It was Tony. I've got the evidence, he's been bound over . . ."

"Take your dirty hands off me!" she screamed at him. "You made the evidence. Murderer!"

His right hand was no longer upon her shoulder. In a flash it had fastened to her soft throat, the fingers like claws. His face was close to hers, his breath beating against her wide-opened eyes. But that coolness of reason which had for so many years carried the man along in safety upon the vague borderlines of crime, had not entirely forsaken him now. Again he flung her from him, brutally and in rising anger, but with no intent to kill. Where she fell Polly lay a moment. Then she got up dizzily, her hand at her discolored throat.

"It'll be me who gets you," she whispered, each word born of pain in her throat. "Me and Bobbie'll celebrate with a feed with all the trimmings the day you stretch a rope for doing for Joe Le Brun!"

"It's a lie," said Ambrose. "A ne and you know it. You little fool!"

"Yes, I'm a fool," panted Polly, "or I'd have known all along! But I never thought of you doing it. Not even when I'd heard you talking with papa not ten minutes before it happened. Not even when I'd known you and him had quarreled more than once. Oh, you played it foxy, all right, coming right back and grabbing Tony the Cat and framing him for it! It's the nerviest thing you ever did, Ambrose, but God knows you had to do it. And . . . and it ain't going to save your neck for you, for now I know! And I can prove it! I can prove it!"

What with the treatment she had had at his hands, her natural loathing of him, the excitement of the evening and the shock of the suspicion that it had been Ambrose who had killed Joe Le Brun, the girl was in the grip of a nervousness which was little short of hysteria. Her eyes blazed into his like the eyes of a mad woman; her whole body was shaking. She kept saying over and over, "I can prove it! I can prove it!"

"You'd better explain just what you mean," said Ambrose sharply, "or keep your mouth shut."

"Keep my mouth shut?" She laughed at him wildly. "If you'd just killed Joe Le Brun, I might. But after you've hounded Bobbie Ashe the way you have! After you've made life a stinking hell for me! I mean that papa must have always thought you might double cross him one way or another. I mean that he must have known it was you or him that night before you got him! For he told me something that night, just before you came, Lieutenant Ambrose, that I didn't quite understand then and that I clean forgot in the rumpus, but that I

understand now! He told me and Jim, the barkeep, and the two of us can hang you!"

"What was it?" demanded Ambrose, his manner visibly altered, a new look in his straining eyes.

Again she laughed at him.

"I ain't telling you," she jeered. "I'm going right inside and get the Chief of Police on the long distance line. I'll tell *him* something that'll make him get his clothes on. If," she ran on, her excitement growing by leaps, "if Mikey the Dope hasn't already told him!"

Ambrose's set face went absolutely white. Before he spoke he ran his tongue back and forth between his lips.

"Mikey?" he asked. "What about him?"

"He saw it!" she screamed at him. "He tried to tell me, but I was crazy about this new frame-up on poor old Bobbie and I thought he meant Tony the Cat and I didn't care! I didn't care about anything but Bobbie; I never did. Mikey was afraid to talk, but he's getting worse scared to keep his mouth shut. And now we'll put you where you won't ever bother Bobbie Ashe again."

"Be still!" cried Ambrose fiercely. "Don't scream out your words like . . ."

"But I will!" cried Polly, intoxicated with her hatred and knowledge and sudden power. And then, looking for the first time away from Ambrose's white face she saw two figures standing close together at the rear of the house. "This man is a murderer!" she called loudly, her voice now ringing clear. "He killed Joe Le Brun! Mikey the Dope saw it. . . ."

"I'll get you and Ladyfingers both . . . with my hands!" snarled Ambrose. "In spite of hell I'll get the two of you soon or late!"

He leaped toward her and leaping struck out viciously. Polly dodged, but his big first struck her in the breast and hurled her back so that she fell prone and lay writhing. There was a scream from Evelyn, a gasping shout from Haddon, and Ambrose, who had hunted down many a man in his time, was running, breaking through the shrubbery, Polly's voice ringing in his ears.

No man knew better than he how telephone and telegraph wires might hold a man as in a steel net. Haddon had heard, Haddon was a lawyer. Haddon had shown himself not above taking the advantage fortune shaped to his hand. Ambrose's was essentially the brain of a criminal, prepared to turn him from the illicit assault and plunge him into headlong flight. About his waist he had long carried what he termed to himself his "wings," a money belt, well filled. Since the hour he had killed Joe Le Brun there had been scarcely a minute in which a chance word might not have made a fugitive of him. No man dreads the gallows like the hangman.

The big house whose many windows had remained dark until now seemed to Ambrose suddenly ablaze with lights. He heard voices, he thought that he heard running feet, he imagined that someone within doors was talking excitedly over a telephone. Polly's cry, which had carried barely to Haddon and Evelyn, sounded bugle-clear and loud to Ambrose. The fears which had lain within his breast for a fortnight, held a little in chain by his will, now

shrieked through his consciousness, suddenly released.

He ran down the graveled driveway, in full moonlight. Turning once he saw that there were several figures grouped upon the porch. He didn't turn again. He heard Polly cry out a second time and cursed her in his heart and aloud. Most of all he hated her for having made a fool of him, for having drawn him to believe that she loved him while all the time her every thought was with Ashe.

At last in the big French car, with the motor purring softly and the heavy wheels beginning to revolve, he looked toward the house. But he didn't see beyond Polly Le Brun, Polly who was running toward him, who before the car had started was in the road in front of him, her white face the terrible face of some new Polly. The world was revolving about her, she was sick and shaking, but her agonized eyes were the stubborn eyes of fighting stock. Her generous thoughts like his selfish ones centered upon the car. To him it spelled a chance for liberty; to her it was a necessity for the escape of Bobbie Ashe. For, even with Ambrose in full flight, it was not clear to her that Ashe's danger was greatly minimized.

"Stop!" she cried out to him. "You can go if you leave me the car . . ."

"Out of the way!" thundered Ambrose. "Out of the way or . . ."

But what he might say to her or she to him were lost words now, empty and meaningless and futile. The big car leaped forward and Polly defied him. Ambrose cursed and bent over the wheel, thinking

perhaps that she would get out of the way, wishing perhaps in the red rage possessing him to grind her down. Those who saw could not know his motive or hers. They could only see that but a few feet lay between the girl and the monster thing bearing down upon her, that the car swerved now this way and that as though its driver's hands were uncertain, that Polly's steps were as uncertain, that she seemed to sway dizzily. They could but stare breathlessly as they heard a scream from her and a hoarse, terrible shout from him. And then the heavy wheels had struck her, had struck and passed on and over, and in the white road lay a still, broken Polly, while the car thundered on, sinister and black, with Ambrose bent forward so that his head seemed to rest upon the steering wheel.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND GOES TO SEE WHAT'S NEXT

IN the arms of Bobbie Ashe, borne tenderly, Polly Le Brun made her brief journey to a great, splendid bed-room in the Big House. She was alive, she was even conscious as he laid her down. For she looked up and saw the tears on his cheeks and tried to lift her hand to wipe them away.

"Oh, Polly," he whispered. "Dear little Polly!"

She lay very still upon such a bed as never before had known the touch of her graceful young body, her eyes coming back to his face from the luxurious fixtures and fittings of the room.

"Gee," murmured Polly, though her lips were white and her words were but the faint speech of the dying, "it's sweller than a big hotel, ain't it, Bobbie?"

"Polly," cried Ashe brokenly, "why, why did you . . ."

It seemed to him that she was trying to move her hand again. He put his gently upon it and Polly's fingers shut tight upon his own.

"Tell me good-by, Bobbie," she said in a little. "And beat it. They'll be after you. . . . Can you find my pocket? There's a little money. . . ."

"I don't need money, Polly," he told her. "And

I'm not going to leave you. They won't be after me. Everything is all right but . . ."

"But me?" Despite the terrible look in her eyes she made her lips smile. "I'm just glad, Bobbie. Glad of everything. Gladdest that . . . that it was the car you gave me. . . . And I was just a nasty little cat . . . and I wanted to square myself. . . ."

They were silent, he with his head bowed, she looking at him strangely.

"I want to see . . . Her," she said at last. "Enid."

She didn't look at him then, nor when he went out quietly to ask Enid to come to her. But her eyes were upon the door, at once eager and anxious, when Enid came in.

"Shut the door," said Polly. "Tell Bobbie not to come in until we want him."

Enid came softly to the stricken girl's side and knelt and put out her hand for Polly's. But Polly shook her head.

"Don't touch me!" she said sharply. "I . . . I . . . Good God! Do you think I'm made of rock?"

Enid remained very still looking compassionately into Polly's questing eyes. The city girl examined her in detail, saying presently,

"Stand up."

Enid rose and stood waiting. Polly's gaze traveled from head to foot, came back searchingly to Enid's face.

"And so you found the way to make him love you."

Enid made no answer as obviously none was wanted. At last Polly sighed and closed her eyes, and from between the shut lids two great tears went slowly to her pallid cheeks.

"You know all about Bobbie?" asked Polly suddenly, her eyes flying wide open.

"Yes."

"You know who he is?"

"Yes. I have just read the letter he wrote me. He is Ladyfingers."

"You love him? Like he loves you?"

"Yes," answered Enid faintly, her clasped hands tightening upon each other.

"You don't care if he is what he is?"

"Yes," said Enid for the fourth time, her voice still quiet but sounding weary and hopeless. "I do care. How can I help caring?"

Again Polly sighed.

"Then you don't love him right. Then you don't love him like I do. . . ."

"So that I would give up my life for him?" Enid's lips were scarcely less white than Polly's. "If that were all, I'd do it gladly. . . ."

"Oh, it ain't much!" said Polly with a little flash of her old manner. "Not if you say it quick!"

"Forgive me!" cried Enid, her face flushing at Polly's misinterpretation. "I didn't mean that! You have been wonderful. . . . Oh, I know so much about you. In his letter he told me of you. . . ."

"Of me?" Polly moved her head upon the pillow. "Bobbie told you about me?"

"Yes. Of how you were brave and unselfish and

good though you had had no chance. How you had been the only friend he had ever had. . . ."

"How I double crossed him?"

"No."

"He's a good sport. Good old Bobbie! And . . ." Again she stared measuringly at Enid. "If you've made him love you it's up to you to be a good sport too!"

Enid made no reply.

"You see," went on Polly, "when you love a man . . . like I do . . . why, it don't make any difference what he is or what he does. You just *love* him and go on loving him. It's sort of like he was a baby, your baby, . . . your baby . . ."

Now that she stopped it was just because she had no strength in her to go on. Enid saw that again she had lost consciousness and was afraid that she was dead. She ran to the door and Ashe and Mrs. Stetheril came in hurriedly.

But again Polly opened her eyes. They rested upon Ashe. He came to her.

"We've sent for the doctor, Polly," he said gently. "He'll be here in a few minutes. . . ."

Polly smiled at him. She did not seem to have seen the others.

"I'm in a hurry, Bobbie," she whispered. "I won't wait for him. I got a long trip to take. You know . . . you know . . . Good-by, Bobbie. . . ."

"No! Polly!" he commanded hoarsely. "The doctor . . ."

"You see," went on Polly, her fingers again finding his, "I always was a curious little fool. I always was a curious . . . I said that, didn't I,

Bobbie? Gee! Ain't it funny how cold you get when . . . when . . . I've always just been crazy to see what's next! Haven't you? When the doctor comes you tell him . . . you tell him, Bobbie . . ."

"Yes, Polly?"

"I double crossed you, Bobbie. I thought I was in love with you!" Game to the finish of her fight she managed a laugh which made old Rachel Stetheril's eyes suddenly as wet as were Ashe's and Enid's. "Wasn't I the little fool? You tell . . . tell . . ."

"The doctor?"

"No. The fellow I love. It's . . ."

"Jim?" he prompted.

"Yes. Jim. Gee! He's the swell looker, Bobbie. You tell him I . . . tell him I . . ."

She broke off abruptly and seemed to be listening intently. Then she sighed. Her eyes went now to Enid.

"I want somebody to hold me up," she said pantingly.

Enid looked at Ashe significantly. He slipped his arm about Polly and lifted her so that she sat up among the pillows.

"I wanted to square myself, Bobbie," she said, her eyes turning to find his. "With you."

"Oh, Polly," he groaned. "Don't say that! If I was as square with the world as you are . . ."

"Am I, Bobbie? Honest to God?" anxiously.

"Honest to God," he told her, his voice catching.

Polly sought to laugh and they who heard her shuddered.

"Good-by, folks," she cried, starting up as though she were going to leave them physically. "You tell the doctor I've gone on to . . . to see what's next! I . . . Oh, Bobbie! Bobbie! . . . Bobbie! . . ."

For an instant she stiffened in his arms. Then a shudder ran through her tortured body. She relaxed, her head fell against his shoulder. The adventurous soul of poor little Polly Le Brun had at last gone forth upon the great quest.

CHAPTER XXIX

SILENCE

"FROM the very first minute I plopped my two eyes on him, I knowed him!" Old man Beeson nodded sagely. "Yes, sir; I knowed him. Just like that!" He snapped his shaking old fingers as an indication, perhaps, rather of the speed than of the manner in which the knowledge had come to him. "I knowed him for a Stetheril and a dad burned good Stetheril, at that! So did Rachel Stetheril know him. The living picture of George Stetheril that I come over from the old country with, me just a boy of ten. Yes, sir!"

A shock and a surprise to the whole valley, was it? Old man Beeson laughed shrilly. With several of Lockworth's citizens about him, the group swelling steadily, he held forth at length and with abandon, in his best manner. In sharp whispers which did not reach his ears there were everywhere quick commands for dogs and babies to be still. Old man Warner, the natural enemy of the orator of the occasion, held to the outer fringe of the packed circle, clawed at his beard and spat frequently, contemptuously, and carelessly.

"From the very first minute!" reiterated old man Beeson, a querulous challenge in his tone. "Just like that! From his eye I knowed him and

from his walk and from the way he carried his head and the way he laughed. Yes, sir! You see, Rachel Stetheril's getting along, but shucks, I can remember when she was born. She married a man name of . . . name of . . ."

In the brief hesitation old man Warner tittered wickedly and thrust his old thumb nail which was long and hard into the ribs of the most conveniently located listener.

"He cain't remember! The old fool cain't remember!" he announced joyously. "You watch!"

"Yes, sir!" went on old man Beeson triumphantly. "That she did. And there was a son. Fine little chap he was, too. Used to ride on my back all over. But his papa. . . . Pshaw! he was nothing! Died when he was forty and Rachel so ashamed of him she went back to her old name. Stetheril. There ain't none better. No, sir; not here or *a*-broad. And then this little feller he growed up, a han'some dog with all the girls in the county just crazy over him. And what did he do? He up and married a cigar maker's daughter when he might have married a earl's and Rachel Stetheril chucked the two of them out and slammed the door after them! Yes, sir; that's the way Rachel Stetheril did things."

"He cain't remember what *his* name was!" chimed in old man Warner as old man Beeson stopped for breath and a suck at his cold pipe. "He cain't remember!"

"Yes, sir," continued old man Beeson. "That's just what happened. And he never come back, being a Stetheril himself and stubborn. And *he* had

a daughter, leastways the cigar maker's daughter that he married had a daughter he was the father of and *he* died, not having much lasting qualities either, and the cigar maker's daughter died, and the baby girl came to the Big House to live. Why, I remember how Rachel took on, and what a baby girl that was, too! And *she* grew up. A pretty thing she was; just like her grandmother was seventy year ago. Blue eyed . . ."

"Brown eyed!" muttered old man Warner. "*I* remember. And not much to look at, either. Skinny and tall like, but," he admitted, "nice. Soft hearted, you know, and good. . . ."

"A little thing and plump," said old man Beeson, staring belligerently toward old man Warner, whose words he had not caught but who, he knew from experience, would be seeking to take a part now in matters which had come to pass during the last couple of scores of years. "Fell in love, she did, with a good-for-nothing name of Ellis. . . ."

"Didn't ever love him!" spat out old man Warner angrily. "*I* know! I was there! She was drove to marry him by . . ."

"And married him," continued Beeson hurriedly. "In spite of what Rachel told her to do. And ran away. . . ."

"Was kicked out and the door slammed!" grunted Warner. "Much *he* knows how to tell straight! Why, he cain't remember . . ."

"And then they went away to San Francisco. And *he* died. And *she* died. And a baby was born. That was after *he* died and before *she* died." Here old man Beeson went slowly, guarding against a

possible slip. "And word was that the baby died. And then Rachel Stetheril let the years go sliding by. But after a while a man told her . . . a man name of . . ."

"He cain't remember! He cain't remember!" chuckled old man Warner prematurely.

For to Beeson had come a sudden inspiration and he used it to cover himself with glory.

"A man name of Beeson!" he announced with many nods. "It was me going to Rachel Stetheril not six months ago and saying, 'Look here, Rachel, I don't believe it! That baby ain't dead!' And she began looking for him and . . . Why, the first minute I plopped my two eyes on him I said to myself, 'Well. That's a Stetheril.' When it comes to a Stetheril maybe you can fool some folks," and his roving eye sought an ancient enemy. "But you can't fool me. No, sir!"

Old man Warner fidgeted and mumbled and cutting a generous bit of tobacco from his plug put both pieces back into his pockets. Old man Beeson continued.

Rare doings at the Big House these few days? There had been that! Yes, sir! A girl dead and nobody knew who she was. Old man Beeson had his suspicions but . . . Well, time would show who was right! No ordinary person that girl, either! A great lady, dressed like a princess and in her own car, a car that nobody not a millionaire would think of owning. Dead, because she had tried to stop the escape of a murderous, desperate criminal who had come to cheat Robert Stetheril Ellis out of his place. And the murderer? Oh,

they'd get him; trust old man Beeson's word for that.

And Justin Haddon? A crook, sir. There's a man you could always have known for a slick one if you'd but had your senses about you. Maybe he could have taken in some fools, there were always fools about who were ready and anxious to be taken in. And what had happened to him? He'd gone, and who knew where? Who, unless it was old man Beeson?

And that Daly girl? No true Stetheril, that one. Just the great-granddaughter of Rachel Stetheril's sister, and a sly one. Sly enough to try to make people think evil of Robert Stetheril Ellis, sly enough to throw Justin Haddon over in time, sly enough to grab on to Arnold Bond and hang tight until he'd married her and they'd gotten themselves out of Rachel Stetheril's reach. And Bond wasn't such a fool, either! No, sir. He knew what he was about. . . .

And so on. Over and over was it told, in many ways, garbled and twisted and now and then true in its essentials. The valley thrilled with the greatest complex sensation in its memory. The papers up and down the state made much of it. Robert Stetheril Ellis's name and the name of Robert Ashe came in due time to be mentioned together and in large type. Lockworth came to know the presence of eager young men in city clothes who had money to spend and questions to ask. Speculation both as to past and future took unto itself a thousand forms. Rumor, born of misshapen fact and distorted fancy, grew into the old coiling

serpent writhing into dark places, hissing through the silences, spitting much venom. There were those who hated Rachel Stetheril, many not entirely without reason, those who were jealous of Robert Stetheril Ellis, those who lifted their voices merely because of the intrinsic interest belonging to the situation. Lockworth was deeply stirred.

Gossip sought to draw Enid Camden into the vortex of the thing and in the end made little of her. She and Ronnie had gone somewhat hurriedly to San Francisco to join their mother there. She had seemed a little pale, a little weary at the station. But she had spoken quietly enough and had waved and smiled her farewell from the train window. Stout voices maintaining that she and the new heir were desperately in love with each other were answered by other stout voices crying, "Piffle!" He was a common thief, said some, and she had seen through him. A gay young gentleman, just wild enough to be interesting, said others, looking back with an eloquent eye over their own rollicking youths. The old woman had wrecked the love story . . . it had been young Robert Stetheril Ellis who now felt himself above a farmer's daughter . . . it had been Enid. It was many a long day before men meeting got down to crops and politics again and women to their babies.

In the meantime the grass was green over the grave of little Polly Le Brun, Enid Camden had sent back no word of herself, and Rachel Stetheril with Robert Stetheril Ellis had left the Big House closed up and none knew where they were traveling.

CHAPTER XXX

HOW A CHANGE CAME ABOUT

FIRST to return to the valley were Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Bond. Late in June they moved into the imposing new concrete dwelling whose white walls shone brightly through the great trees of the old Duckworth place just out of the town. The countryside called, took admiring stock of the hardwoods and luxurious furnishings, set the seal of approval upon the "match," found him a proud husband and her a delightful hostess, and forthwith claimed them both as two of the valley's highly representative and admirable citizens.

But the Bonds brought scant word of Mrs. Stetheril and young Ellis, none of Enid. The old woman's war upon Bond had been common talk. Now it became obvious that peace had been made, that she had given them elaborate wedding presents and her blessing; that she had accepted him as a sort of son-in-law.

"Oh, Bond's no fool," said the knowing ones. "They'll get their share of the Stetheril millions. You see."

Next came Enid Camden, little Ronnie with her. Through Bond's influence, grown no little since his marriage, she secured the position of teacher

in the Larkspur district school and, toward the middle of August, entered upon her duties with a tremendous monthly salary of seventy-five dollars. She and Ronnie boarded with the Wallaces on the ...e of the valley, near the foothills. They had many quiet walks together through the woods where once upon a time Ronnie had been an Indian hunter and they had come upon a young man, lost. It was at once of interest and disappointment to the valley that Enid's cheeks were rose-tinted as of yore, that her eyes sparkled when she laughed and that she laughed often. But the wise ones shook their heads. . . .

Then one day, when Enid's school had been opened for two or three weeks, Rachel Stetheril came back to the Big House. And with her came Robert Stetheril Ellis. Those who could find opportunity or make excuse hastened to satisfy their curiosities. So they came upon at least one unexpected matter which gave rise to varying opinions and no end of discussion.

"She's been a wonderful woman," said some, sighing as befitted the occasion. "But, Lordy! Think how old she is! We've all got to break, sooner or later."

And they spoke pityingly of her tardy entrance into the time they chose to name her second childhood. It is a delightful thing to be able to feel pity of any sort for one of Rachel Stetheril's station!

The two had returned late one afternoon. The next morning Robert Stetheril Ellis was the one person about the house and grounds who was not touched by a growing fever of alarm. For six

o'clock came and went and Rachel Stetheril did not appear for breakfast! Half past six, seven o'clock, and no call from her, no sound of her old stick upon the thick rugs or bare floors! Browdy went to her door half a dozen times, walking tiptoe, her face anxious. No sound of one stirring within! Carter, very restless this morning, coughed often behind his hand and made little aimless journeys here and there, stopping now and then, abruptly, to listen. The cook was in a condition bordering upon collapse for approximately two hours. The biscuits were "done to a turn" at the regular time, and went cold. The cook hastily made up her second batch, trembling lest Mrs. Stetheril demand them while they were in the dough state. But these, too, were browned and burned and went cold. And still Mrs. Stetheril did not come to breakfast.

Robert Ellis came down at about eight o'clock.

"You'll have breakfast now, sir?" asked Carter.

"No, Carter," he explained absently. "At half past nine, please. I'm going out for a little walk, first."

He came back a few minutes before the hour and a half passed and went to the breakfast room.

"Has Grandmother come down yet?" he asked in a tone which to the ears of the serving maid sounded criminally careless.

"Not yet, sir," she informed him tremulously. "Do you suppose that . . ."

"I'll wait for her," he said with the same carelessness, and the girl hastened to join the caucus of servants convened in the kitchen with Carter

acting the part of chairman with deep gravity. It lacked twenty minutes of ten when Rachel Stetheril made her appearance!

And such an appearance! News of it fled from kitchen to the remotest part of the big house, out into the gardens, to the distant fields, and in an incredibly short time into Lockworth itself! Taking into consideration the hour and the picture which the little old woman made it is small wonder.

The only black thing about her was her eyes. Her morning gown, a creation which had put into a delightful flutter the most renowned of San Francisco's dressmaker's, was lavender! There was lace about the throat, too, wonderful old lace as delicate as the most delicate of flowers. White hair, faintly flushed cheeks, dainty lavender gown, she looked some great lady of an olden time stepped out of a great artist's canvas. And at nearly ten o'clock!

Robert Ellis was upon his feet in an instant, his two hands out to her, his moody eyes going suddenly bright.

"Grandmother!" he told her softly, as he held her hands and looked at her. "You are wonderful!"

She smiled. Rachel Stetheril, who had not yet breakfasted, smiled! Carter, one eye at the crack of the door, turned pale.

"Something-like has come over her," he muttered, with half a mind upon the instant to give her notice.

"Am I, Robert?" she asked softly. It seemed that the faint color in her cheeks deepened.

"Blushing!" gasped Carter. "It's scandalous! My God! What's happened?"

Robert Ellis kissed her and with her arm through his escorted her to her chair, placing it for her. She caught up the hand which for a second touched her shoulder and put her cheek to it.

"It's a fact," Robert announced as he regarded her over the unfolding of his napkin. "You are getting prettier and younger every day."

She laughed at him. But the flush in her cheeks was still there and an unwonted brightness in her eyes. She nodded quite a gay good morning at the girl who came in tremulously with the biscuits undeniably something past the point of perfection. The girl looked a trifle embarrassed, being prepared no doubt for an entirely different sort of greeting, and withdrew hastily to be interrogated at once by Carter and the cook.

"Why haven't you always worn gowns like that?" the young fellow wanted to know. "Lavender was made for you."

"I've always been too busy, Robert," she answered hastily. "Now I'm through with railroads and real estate, stocks and bonds. I'm going to see Evelyn this morning, her and Arnold. You and he are going to take the burden off my shoulders, my boy. Will you come with me?"

But he shook his head, his eyes suddenly grave as they had been before her coming.

"Would you mind if I didn't . . . today?" he asked. "I have something . . ."

"Enid?" quickly.

"Yes, Grandma. I am going to see her this

afternoon. After her school is out. And in the meantime I . . ."

She finished it for him when he hesitated, saying quietly,

"You want to be alone. To think things over. Of course, Robert. I'll have Evelyn and Arnold over to dinner in a day or so. You'll see them then."

He looked at her gratefully. But, out of a brief silence, it was she who spoke again.

"You are quite happy, Robert?" She asked it quietly and with a half attempt at carelessness, but through the words, thinly veiled, shone a vague wistfulness.

His quick smile drove the gravity from his eyes. "When you have done everything for me! Given me everything . . ."

"If I only could! There is Enid. . . . You still love her very much, Robert?"

"With all my heart," he told her gently.

"So that there is no love left for me?" she bantered him. And then, seeing the look of reproach he turned upon her, she cried, "Tut, tut! Don't be a fool!" in a manner which was something of a relapse into the old way of the old Black Witch and which brought a gleam of hope into Carter's despairing breast.

"There is something else, Robert," she said presently, her voice lowered so that Carter finally gave over his undignified position and allowed himself to be drawn by the cook into an expression of his opinions. "I have seen it for two months. Ever since . . . Robert, you are not allowing yourself to be made unhappy by . . . by things

that have passed? You don't blame yourself for them now, do you, dear?"

"I should be an ungrateful dog if I allowed myself to be made unhappy by anything, after all you have done for me," he assured her quickly.

But it did not satisfy her.

"You have always been the gayest soul I ever knew," she went on. "Until you laid Polly Le Brun back upon the pillows, dead. You have never been quite your old self since, Robert."

"It is as though I had killed her," he answered slowly. "As though I had done it with my own hand. If it had not been for me . . ."

"She would never have died? Nor," she cried warmly, "would she ever have lived, really lived! The biggest happiness the poor girl ever got out of life was in loving you, Robert. Nor was her greatest sorrow to die in your arms."

"She squared herself." He spoke softly as though to himself, and there were tears in his eyes. "She paid in full. And I . . . I seem to escape paying at all! It is unfair!"

"You have made restitution as far as possible. . . ."

"With money, yes," he admitted bitterly. "With money which you gave me."

"Robert," she admonished him, "you are young; very, very young. I haven't been so young as you are for something like a hundred years, I think. Also, you *may* have a liver. You go take a good long walk. See Enid just as soon as God'll let you. And, if *she*'ll let you, bring her to dinner tonight."

This morning he made himself a sandwich, the belated twin to that memorable sandwich which he had taken adventuring with him upon a certain historic First of May, and struck out across the fields toward the foothills. And in the woods, where first he had come upon Enid Camden, he spent the long quiet hours during which he must wait to see her, lying for the most part upon his back, staring up at stirring branches and patches of blue sky.

He was going to see Enid. About this almighty fact his thoughts clung all day, sometimes wandering backward, touching upon other days with her, sometimes daring to leap forward searching on the future, but always returning to this: He was going to see Enid.

Recognizing in love the great master who has written fire into the human comedy, the boy accepted his lines eagerly; cast in the rôle of young yearning he was playing his part with the ardor of his nature, seeing in it, as does each one of us, a thing created for him alone. God knows the drama is older than the dust upon which the Sphinx was builded; Love knows it is eternally as new and fresh and fragrant as blossoming violets. Robert Stetheril knew that in the world were many things desirable, but nothing so to be desired as a girl.

In the beginning she had touched his leaping fancies with the physical charm of her rare beauty. He had never seen anything so beautiful. In his young poet's soul nothing stood higher than perfect loveliness. A great poet before him had said, "If you get simple beauty and naught else, you

get about the best thing God invents." True "that's somewhat!" And was it not equally true that "Beauty is Truth, Truth, Beauty?" In Enid this was so. The outer sign was fulfilled in the inner meaning. Beauty of body, that had caught his quickened interest, was but the visible expression of that beauty of soul which held him.

The mystery of love is no less deep than the mystery of life One does not bestow from the boundlessness of his affection at the dictate of logic nor upon the advice of one's friends. More frequently does he ignore the first and offend the second. But perhaps the reasons directing the attraction which thrills through chosen mates are no less logical than the great laws in answer to which worlds swing and flowers bloom, immutable and hidden forces, co-eternal with God. Youth, however, unafraid, seeks with hardy, adventurous soul to fight shadows and look beyond drawn curtains. It hurls at the universe its challenge from a bright blade; it stares at mysteries and demands to be told "Why?"; it solves to its own satisfaction the problems whose solutions are forbidden. It is like babyhood that lifts a hand to the moon; it has learned neither "I can't," nor "I don't know."

"I have everything in the world," mused the boy, "but Enid. I have youth and health, strength and freedom and wealth. I can do what I want to do; I can go where I wish to go; I can see what I want to see; I can be what I want to be; I can have what I want to have. But already I have everything in the world . . . but Enid. And I want Enid, just Enid, and nothing else in the world!"

He asked himself "Why?" and he found the answer. City bred, he had found life here in the open the complement to such concrete-bound life as he had lived. After the city streets and tall buildings and square corners and man-made things the woodlands with their open, sunlit spaces and twisting paths were a grateful relief. They spoke first to the body, then through it to the soul. Not that they had sought to convert him from thievery; what he had been they ignored, merely speaking vaguely of a larger life. He had been denied such an existence as one might lead here, but from the blood of his fathers the desire of it had been insistent within him.

Enid born of the woodlands, bred within their shades, had been like them more than she could know. She had the utter frankness, the hint of shyness which was not fear, the quiet poise, the cleanness of nature, the clear eyes of the country girl. As the forest pools were clear and bright and pure so was her soul. She, too, embodied something until now denied him. He remembered how, for a little, he had turned toward Evelyn Daly. She, with her way of the great, cultured lady, had brought into his life something new to it. But the veneer of social polish was not the vital thing like Enid's pure innocence to awake an admiration which had in it something of awe and which, in the end, gave birth to love.

So Robert Stetheril Ellis, lying upon his back and staring up at listless branches and patches of deep blue, told himself in countless ways that he loved Enid because she was Enid . . . and

fancied that he had caught love in the snare of his logic and had made the winged boy confess what had brought him here.

After a long while, searching in his pockets for his sandwich, he found that it had taken unto itself the mystery of quiet disappearance. A few crumbs in the grass beside him were being carried away by a lot of busy ants; there was a suspicion of butter upon his fingers. Seeking to give the matter his undivided interest he was enabled at last to summon up the faintest of memories of the taste of roast beef. He laughed softly. The laugh ended in a sigh. He got to his feet. It was nearly four o'clock. He was going to see Enid. At last, he was going to see Enid. He lifted his feet carefully, moving at first cautiously. As unconscious about what he was doing now as he had been of eating, he was painstakingly avoiding stepping upon any of the ants busy with the crumbs. He was on his way to a meeting with Enid.

CHAPTER XXXI

"WE HAVE NO RIGHT!"

THEY met at the door of the little schoolhouse. The last of her handful of pupils had scampered down the knoll. Out in the country road they were making great clouds of dust into which they raced in barefooted merriment. Enid's back was to him as he waited; she was locking the door. He could hear her humming an old song. Then she turned, still unconscious of his nearness, her wide straw hat in one hand, her lunch basket in the other. He had never seen her quite so pretty.

She stopped and grew very still when she saw him. For a little she did not move, only the deep swelling of her breast, a little quickening of her musing eyes, a faint deepening of color in her cheeks bespeaking the emotion which his unexpected coming had aroused within her. Then she smiled quickly, the old, glad smile though even then it seemed to his acute senses not quite its own spontaneous self, and came forward to meet him, her hand held out to him.

"Enid!" he said.

"I am glad, Robert," she answered, her self-possession far greater than his. "So glad to see you again."

She let him retain her hand, kept the smile upon her lips as he crushed her fingers in his. Slowly

their hands fell apart. Together, in silence, they turned and walked down the knoll and out into the road.

He wanted her in his arms as he had wanted her all these empty weeks. Just what it was that held him powerless to draw her into his embrace he did not know. Certainly not the fact that the scurrying urchins might see him; he had forgotten that they existed. Already a peculiar restraint had arisen between them. With so much to say they said nothing. The silence continued as the dust puffed up under their feet, not the contented silence of other days, but a stillness which was strangely disquieting.

Again and again he lifted his eyes to her face and she, feeling the look, turned to meet it squarely. He came at last to feel that she was waiting for him to speak.

"Enid," he asked her, his eyes troubled and anxious, "do you love me, dear? You haven't stopped loving me, have you?"

"I love you," she told him steadily. And, quite simply as though putting into unnecessary words the very obvious, she added, "I shall never stop loving you. You know that."

"Then, Enid, what is it, dear? I thought that we should be so happy, just to be together again. That everything was going to be all right with you and me. That we were going to make it all right."

"Isn't it?" she asked quickly, the first hint of uneasiness showing in her manner.

"You know it isn't. You must feel it. As I do. . . . Don't you, Enid?"

"Yes. I do know it, Robert."

"Then what is it?" he demanded as one who has the right to know. "You know that I love you. You say that you love me. Is there anything in all the world of worlds that can matter then?"

"Yes." The word came faintly but firmly. "We have had so much time to think, Robert. And though to you and me our love seems the very greatest thing in the world, we can't forget. . ."

"What?" he challenged sharply when she hesitated.

But for the moment circumstance gave her respite from the answer. A sudden blast of a motor horn, the gleeful shouts of the children far ahead, a new swirl of dust and a big touring car was bearing down upon them. They moved a little further to the side of the road for it to pass on. But the young woman in the rear seat had called something to her resplendently uniformed driver and the automobile stopped just abreast of them. Evelyn Bond was waving gaily.

"Robert!" she cried. "And Enid! I'm just *delighted* to see you, both of you! I'm simply *crazy* to talk with you!"

With no alternative suggesting itself they came to the car and shook hands. Evelyn's eyes were dancing, her color was perfect, her mood was one of radiant joy. She had entertained her dear Aunt for luncheon, had had all doubts in a certain quarter set aside and was now on her way to Lockworth to order by telegraph a diamond necklace upon which she had set her heart during her honeymoon.

"Enid," she ran on, "you're just adorable in that

dear little gown! Where did you find such a darling thing? Cousin Robert," shaking her gloved finger at him, "you deserve no end of scoldings!"

"I didn't know that I had offended," he replied, the restraint of his manner passing quite unnoticed by the effusive Evelyn.

"But you have! All this time, since the night you telephoned from Piedmont to the San Francisco chief of police, you've been going about with mystery on top of mystery locked up in your breast when you knew I was just *dying* for a peep at them! You've got to come and see me and tell me everything. Just think of it, Enid! He's Robert Stetheril Ellis, right now as good as a millionaire a dozen times over! And he was Mr. Steele, if you please, private secretary! And Robert Ashe, Expert on Burglar Proof Safes! And . . . *Ladyfingers!* Gracious! It takes one's breath away." She laughed gaily. Then, in simulated seriousness, her eyes widened, her brows lifted, "I don't know whether to be most proud or frightened to acknowledge acquaintance with my romantic cousin."

"I didn't imagine," said Ellis quietly, "that one ever spoke of knowing a thief with pride."

"Robert!" shuddered Evelyn delightfully. "You mustn't speak like that. But I'll tell you," leaning forward confidentially, and again aiming her finger at him, "you're just the lion of the valley! There's not a woman I know who doesn't turn perfectly green with envy when I mention my Cousin Robert! For they all know that you never had a chance, really; and that you've been just *perfectly splendid!* You must come and see me, soon, and let me show

you off. And you, too, Enid? Won't you? . . . Won't you jump in with me now? I'll run you into Lockworth in a minute and take you wherever you want to go!"

"Thank you, Evelyn," Robert answered quickly. "But . . ."

"Oh, I know! I know!" cried the young matron as though she did know and could, if required, name the very date set for the wedding. "I was young once upon a time myself, you may remember! Drive on, Dutton. And be sure you come to see me real soon, both of you! Good-by, *good*-by."

She was on her way again in her speeding car, Robert and Enid on their way, walking in the dust. Her coming and going had been in the manner of a whirlwind leaving an unbroken quiet after it.

Through the silence which went with them he could feel the thing that he had felt from the beginning. Enid with all of her might was seeking to be as she had always been with him, seeking and failing.

"Tell me," he said at last. "What is it? You are sure that you love me? As I love you?"

She nodded. The wide brim of her hat hid her eyes from him. Her head was bent a little; there was a misty blur across her sight.

"It was what Evelyn said?" he asked slowly. "It is because I have been . . . a thief?"

She might have evaded the question for a little; she might have answered in many hesitant words instead of in one final one, but then she would not have been Enid. So she told him gently,

"Yes."

When he did not speak again she looked at him

and saw that his eyes were dark with pain and that there was a dull, hot flush in his cheeks. She wanted to put her two arms about him and mother him; she wanted to slip to his breast and feel the grip of his arms about her; she wanted to cry. But she turned away and bit at her trembling lip and looked through the mist of her tears at the shimmering, sun-smitten road.

Into his breast came a flash of rebellion. He loved her; she said that she loved him. A man may fight for his life and for his love without shame.

"Enid," he said, "I have been a thief all of my life. I have never known anything else until these last few months. But it is different now. That is a part of the past. Can't we try to forget it? Can't we begin afresh now? Can't we build up our lives from today? My God! I love you so that no matter what you might have done, no matter what you might have been, I'd want you! That is what love means. Don't you know that, Enid? I am unworthy but I love you so that in the future nothing will be impossible. And, if you love me . . ."

"I love you, Robert. More than everything else in the world. But can't you see, dear, what is best . . . what must be . . ."

"But why? Why?" he cried passionately. "Is it that you would be ashamed . . ."

"Don't!" she said quickly. "You must know me better than that! I am not ashamed of you. I would be proud . . . proud . . . if I were not afraid . . ."

It came in a whisper. In spite of her determination her voice broke and she could not go on.

"Afraid of what? Of me, dear?"

"I said, before I knew who you were," she continued, "that I was sorry for Ladyfingers. That he had never had a chance. That you have become what you have, in spite of circumstance, that you have educated yourself, made a gentleman of yourself. . . . I *am* proud of you. . . ."

"You are afraid . . ."

"Not of you," whispered Enid. "Not of you! Oh, Robert! Can't you see?"

He shook his head. He was not thinking of *that*. She would have to tell him. And, though it was not easy, she told him.

"Do you remember, on that day in the woods, how I told you that some day Ladyfingers would have to pay? The laws men make . . ."

"Listen, Enid!" he broke in eagerly. "I don't want you to be afraid that some day I'd be arrested and dragged to jail. I want you to know that, so far as has been possible, I have made restitution. Every cent I have taken in all my life I have paid back. Grandmother and I have put all these months into it. And more, we have dealt with Mr. Galbraith. . . . He's the . . . he is to district attorney you know . . . and . . . chief of police. There is absolutely no evidence in the world against me. They have both said there will be no arrest since with the fight I can put up conviction would be utterly impossible. There is no fear of my having to pay that way unless," and he added it bitterly seeing the gravity had but grown in her eyes, "fate was right when he said . . ."

"What was it, Robert?"

"That old lie!" he blurted out. "He says he'll get me yet because, 'Once a crook, always a crook!' You don't believe that, do you?"

"If it were just that, Robert, I'd take no chance and thank God for it. Tell me this, Robert, tell me the truth and I will believe you: Right now in your heart, are you any different from the man you have always been?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . Forgive me, dear! . . . You have called yourself a thief. Has any real change come in you? Or is it just that outside circumstances have changed? Do you look at the things you have done as wrong, utterly wrong? Tell me the truth. . . ."

"Enid," he pleaded with her, "can't we forget what is past? Can't we begin over?"

"I don't think so, Robert. In his brutal way wasn't the chief of police right? Have you really changed . . . inside . . . or is it just as if it were the same Ladyfinger in a new suit of clothes?"

"If I tell you it doesn't matter what happens, I'll never . . ."

But she shook her head.

"I don't want to preach at you," she said softly. She even sought his hand and pressed it. You are a good man and I love you. But . . ."

She flung up her head and looked at him with a new light in her eyes.

"Have you ever thought beyond just you and me?" she asked him bravely. "Have you thought that some day a son might be given to us? Do you

know what heredity means? Would you like to have your son, our son, a thief?"

"Good God!" he muttered. "You think . . ."

"I am afraid! Oh, I am afraid! And we have no right! Think of Ronnie. If I saw him, day after day, turning toward the thing I dreaded, if it was not his fault but his father's, mine, too, for having married his father . . . Oh, I am afraid of it!"

Her face suddenly was piteously white. Essentially a potential mother, it was as though the dream-child were born, branded with a curse. There would be a taint in the blood more terrible than the taint of disease, like the taint of insanity. She had raised Ronnie, she had mothered him when other girls mothered their dolls. Experience and instinct were warning her.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MAN-MADE GAME

A FEW brief months ago a young thief had sat upon a fence in the sunshine and had taken his fill of joy from a splendid world. Penniless, he had looked about him with the air of a proprietor, saying within himself: "It is mine!" And now a dual wonder had happened: It was his, and it meant no more to him than did the white, useless ash of a dead cigar upon his table. Robert Stetheril Ellis, master of millions, communing long with his soul, found himself in the thick of shadows. The millions were for the moment negligible.

He wanted Enid Camden. Now more than ever before. For hope of the morning had been followed by utter hopelessness of the late afternoon. Let a man desire a thing, no matter how eagerly, seeing it almost within his grasp, then snatch it away and immeasurably you increase his longing. So mightily did he want Enid now that the wealth which his fortune had put into his hands seemed but emptiness and mockery.

He knew that he could not go back to her tomorrow and the next day, pleading with her. Her resolution was taken and might not be shaken. She loved him, too. That but made darker the shadow-

world through which he was groping. She was afraid that their son might be like him!

He knew little enough of heredity, as little as Enid knew. But he did not doubt that in the offspring the stronger characteristics of the parents are born again. And, seeking to estimate his own inner being . . . a sad task for him who looks through the magnifying glass of youth! . . . he told himself that first of all he was a thief. He didn't say, "I have done wrong," or "I have sinned." He merely said, "I am a thief. I am a fool and have bungled my life."

Not at first had he looked upon Enid as irrevocably lost to him. Both unreasoningly and rebelliously he had sought to tear down the world about him and construct one more to his liking. But as the long night wore on and he sat alone in the silence of his own room he came to see the futility and foolishness of blindly charging against unscalable heights. Enid was set as far apart from him as though she dwelt upon a separate star. But it was close upon midnight when he admitted it.

There came to him such hours of bitterness as his gay young life had never known. His passion for Enid gripped him in iron hands. He believed that he would love her always, and always meant through eternity. Was her love less than his? He believed that it was not. Then what was the meaning of life itself if life together were denied them?

Altogether it was a hideous night during which he battled upon the quicksands. It was towards dawn that a certain train of thought unfolded before him, which was destined to have a vital effect upon the

whole of his future. It had come to him in this guise: He was thinking of that which Enid dreaded; that their son might be a thief. He found himself wondering if this were true, then admitting to himself the vague half-formed fear that it might be. His own son a thief? He frowned. He did not want that. Had matters been different, had he and Enid married, had there been a son, he would not have wanted that son to become a thief.

He sought to analyze his emotion and found that it baffled him. Heretofore he had not looked ahead; looking backward he had been quite content with the way in which he had played the game of life. He went over old ground and found it firm underfoot: A man had a right to what he could take. Might was right. The capitalist took his wealth from the world at large, by strength and cunning; he took what he wanted from the capitalist. Laws were but man-made; they were commands uttered by other men who had no right which he would admit to dictate to him.

But from this firm footing he stepped again into the quicksands. He did not want his son to be a thief. Then, why? Because it was not right? Because it was wrong?

What was Right, after all? And what was Wrong? Ancient terms for youth and age to quibble over, terms until now thrust aside with a contemptuous shoulder by Robert Stetheril Ellis. But now they were cloaked in new importance and he strove with them.

Unconsciously and quite naturally he attacked the issue from a defensive point of view. Was it

wrong for a man who needed a loaf of bread to take it from another man who needed it less or not at all? Was it wrong to steal because, once upon a time a long time ago, God had said: "Thou shalt not steal"? He didn't quite believe that God had ever said anything of the kind. He was rather of the opinion that God would have merely been thwarting his own ends had He put souls into bodies, bodies into the world, laying over them a command to do this or that. It would be more God's way to give them a free swing and not hamper them.

If actions were right or wrong, then it was Nature who had made them so. As Enid had said, "If you eat food which is not good for you, you get sick." It was wrong to defy Nature's laws; that meant it was wrong to defy natural laws. It was right to obey them. And when had Nature told her children, "You must not steal"? She was a thief herself. The wind stole the seeds of the wildflowers and good came of it and Nature was glad of it. The strong crushed the weak; good came of that, too; Nature smiled serene and undisturbed over the conflict. That the grass grew red did not make the skies less blue. Struggle was a part of evolution; if the weak went down it was that they should learn to take to themselves strength. . . .

So he had come to the point from which it seemed to him very clear that right and wrong were measured by the laws of Nature. He went from this point to another, slowly, upon ground never until now trodden by him.

Nature's code of laws had been enough for man just so long as man was merely a part of Nature,

first as a child in the womb, then as a child in her arms. But long ago had come the time when he had drawn his hand away from the clasp of his great mother, taking the first few tottering, baby steps toward a newer life which was to become bigger in the matter of mental expansion.

Then, having begun to make his own life, man had found that he must make his own laws. Those of Nature no longer fitted the freshly created conditions. No longer was man content to awake at dawn and sleep at dark; no longer was he satisfied to eat raw food. The unforgotten lullabies which the great mother had crooned over his cradle were made over into new songs, battle songs, songs of triumph, pæans of freedom and manhood.

In due time, discovering hidden natural laws, he amended them. He made the night bright with artificial light that his workshops might run full blast; he turned day into night that his tired workers might sleep. He clothed old natural laws in tradition; he made new laws of his own. And, established in social communities, he formed perhaps first of all this law: "Thou shalt not steal!"

That was it. God did not care; Nature was a thief herself; it was just man's law, this: "Thou shalt not steal."

A long way had Robert Stetheril Ellis gone to come back to the beginning. But, suddenly, as he swung through the circle, he had come to a point and an eminence from which he saw a new light.

God played fair and square. In the great game which was life He gave every man his chance and He did not interfere. Nature played fair and square.

Her sun and air she held back from no man, let him be what he might. Ladyfingers, in his way, had always played fair and square. Here was a God-law, a nature-law, a man-law, this, "Thou shalt play square!"

Was it playing the game square to steal? "Why not?" he had always said. Now it was long before he answered at all. Strangely enough he thought of the prize ring. There was a game which, in its way, was like the big life-game. Like latter-day life it was a man-made game. There were rules laid down governing it, laws of the game, man-made. "Thou shalt not strike below the belt!" was a command, man-made. The man who, in a clinch, thinking himself hidden like a thief in the darkness, took his advantage, was a contemptible cur. For, in a man-made game he did not keep the man-made law, he did not play fair!

Certain thoughts kept coming back to him, over and over. Life was no longer the old life of God and Nature. It was a new game, a man-made game. There were the Queensbury rules of life and they were called laws. The man who in the night broke these laws was like the boxer in the ring who struck below the belt. . . .

What though there were, no doubt, rents in the garment in which he had clothed his logic? Through them he was seeing the naked truth. Only now did he see where his path, so gaily followed, had led him. Now, as though at a great distance above him, immeasurably removed beyond his reach, did he see two things: Enid and his own self-respect. He dropped his head wearily upon his arms. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE WRATH OF RACHEL STETHERIL

PERHAPS no one but a boy who was something of a day-dreamer, idealist, and poet would have done the thing which Robert Ellis did. There were those who lost no time in dubbing him "Mad." In fact, to the sober-minded country folk, the one word, "Insane," explained much that had gone before, all that was to follow.

Realizing fully that others than himself must be affected by his action he was not precipitate. Several days passed during which Lockworth as well as the house servants grew accustomed to Rachel Stetheril in lavender and with a parasol lace-fringed, Evelyn Daly Bond had the opportunity to entertain her wonderful aunt and romantic cousin and it grew to seem that life had slipped smoothly back into a quiet groove. But an old pair of eyes took stock of much musing moodiness in a young pair and Rachel Stetheril began to blame Enid Camden for her grandson's altered manner.

"Any girl that goes and makes my boy unhappy," was the old woman's way of looking at the matter, "ought to have her little neck twisted."

And at last it was clear to her that her grandson was not happy, though he was striving hard to appear so. Now, more than ever, was he thoughtful of her

and loving and filled with gratitude. In return for the worship of old age he gave the affection of a son. Rachel Stetheril, though she yearned for an answering love as strong as her own, knew that it was not youth's to give unstintedly save to youth, and was content, richly content, until she saw the shadows in his eyes. Then, sweepingly, she condemned Enid. Robert hadn't brought Enid with him to dinner; he hadn't seen her a second time; he hadn't been himself since the one meeting with her.

It happened, fortunately or unfortunately as one looks at the matter, that she broached the subject to him upon a certain day when he was already filled and fired with it. Then came the outer conflagration with an amazing suddenness not unlike that of spontaneous combustion.

"You are not happy, Robert!" she challenged him.

"No," he answered quietly. "Not altogether, Grandma. I . . ."

"Enid has something to do with it?"

"In a way she has everything to do with it. In another . . ."

"The little fool! She won't marry you? She doesn't love you?"

"I don't think that she is a fool at all. I do believe that she does love me. But she is not going to marry me."

"She is a fool! And so are you if you let a little country mouse like her make you unhappy. There are other girls with ten times her looks and brains and backbone who'd be glad to marry you. You'll forget all about her in six months."

"I don't think so," he answered. "And though there are other girls there aren't any other Enids."

She looked at him keenly.

"What's the matter with her?" she demanded. "If she loves you why the devil doesn't she marry you?"

"Grandma," he said gently, hesitating a little. "I hate so to hurt you . . . you have been so good to me. But . . . do you know what I really am, down under the clothes which you have put on me? What I have always been?"

"A gentleman!" she cried warmly. "A boy who has never had a chance and yet who . . ."

"Is a thief," he ended it for her. "Just a common thief."

"Robert! I won't let you say such things. You have been wild. All Stetherils are wild. That . . . that girl! So she is afraid of what people will say, is she? So! That's what her love amounts to . . ."

"It isn't that!" he cried eagerly. "Enid doesn't care what people say. But there is something else . . ."

"What is it?"

He hesitated. He had something to say but it was not of Enid. So, in the end, he said simply:

"Grandma, can't we just leave her out of it? She has told me that she will not marry me and she has given me her reasons and I know that she is right. But there is something else I want to talk with you about, something else which is troubling me. I have been thinking night and day and I have reached a conclusion. I have made up my mind what I am going to do, and I want to talk with you about it."

"Go on, Robert," she said, her voice suddenly very gentle, a strange look as of premonition of tragedy in her eyes.

"I have always been a thief," he continued quickly. "I committed my crimes often enough in a boyish spirit of adventure, just for the lark. But I knew what I was doing and I was a thief. I didn't see that that was anything to be ashamed of. On the other hand I suppose I was a little proud of my skill. I didn't know that I was doing wrong because I didn't believe in right and wrong. To me they were just fools' ways of saying wise and unwise. And now, Grandma . . . It's come all of a sudden, just like that! . . . I know that I have been the fool and a cheat! And I am ashamed!"

"Poor Robert," she murmured, her hand falling softly upon his that lay with tense fingers upon the table top. But even then, with her pity for his suffering standing high in her eyes, there was a little, half-hidden look of fear.

For she had never seen him look quite as he looked now. Had it been given to Polly Le Brun to have seen him just then she might have remembered him as she came upon him that day in the early spring in his rooms, when his eyes were on fire with the poetry of the riotous season. His cheeks were flushed, his head was held lifted defiantly, youth and purpose and determination and rebellion cast their light outward from the flames in his soul. The tender mouth had hardened, the eyes looked into the eyes of Rachel Stetheril and beyond, questing for the unknown of tomorrow.

"He who sins must pay!" he announced sharply,

as though forgetting the presence of the old woman and electing to fight out the question with a power unseen and psychic. "I have sinned because I have not played the game square. I have been a cheat, a contemptible cheat, like the prizefighter who strikes below the belt. And I have not paid!"

Perhaps, just then, he was mad. He was surrendering himself to an ideal. Alienists might have argued the question.

"But, Robert, surely . . . "

He flung up his hand impetuously and leaped to his feet, standing rigid over her.

"I have not paid! And every one must pay! That's another God law, nature law, man law. You can't get away from it. Joe Le Brun sinned and in the end he paid, paid with his life. Ambrose sinned, and he is paying now. Poor little Polly sinned, she did not play the game square, and she, too, paid. Paid in full and squared herself so that when she died she had wiped her slate clean. Haddon even, he is beginning to pay and will pay his whole life long because he is a miser in his soul and will pay but little by little as he is forced to. Just to have to leave here, to be called a crook, to have to try to crawl up again, all that is Haddon's paying. But I am not a miser like Haddon! And if I have been a cheat, I am no longer a cheat. I have sinned and I know it and I am going to pay! Now and in full!"

"What do you mean?" cried the old woman breathlessly, her set face blanched.

"I mean that from the beginning Enid was right. I have begun to pay by making those I love suffer. I have brought sorrow to her. I shall bring sorrow

to you. God knows I am not blind to that. But I can't help it now. I am going to San Francisco in the morning. I am going into the district attorney's office and confess to every crime I have ever committed in my life. And I am going to take my medicine and come out of it, if it takes twenty years, square! Square!" he repeated, the word ringing triumphantly.

"My God!" she wailed, falling back in her chair as though he had struck her a violent physical blow. "You don't know what you are saying, Robert."

"But I do! Haven't I thought it all out, over and over? And after all it isn't a case of thinking. It's a matter of feeling, in here. Just to be square, square with the whole world, is the greatest thing in it. Why, even I, thief as I am, have always fooled myself into thinking that I was playing the game fair. I stole from the big fellows who had ground their money out of the men with the lunch buckets. I didn't care about what the law might have to say, but I did try, in my way, to play fair. And now I see that I have just been a little cheat and that I have got to square myself. Polly did it under the big wheels of Ambrose's machine. I'll do it in the penitentiary. It's where I belong until I can look the other fellow in the eye again. It's the only way."

"Where you belong," she muttered, "is in the mad house!"

He had expected this, more than half hoped for it. If she would only rail at him, not plead with him, it would be so much easier for him to hold to his purpose. If she should seek to reason with him he was ready for her arguments.

But, being Rachel Stetheril and none other, she did none of the things he had considered possible. Their talk had begun with her readiness to find Enid Camden to blame for the boy's unhappiness. It ended with the old woman finding Enid guilty of the crime of crimes of having sought to blot out Robert's life in ignominy and shame. So, not upon his head but upon Enid's, did she heap high her abuse.

"The ungrateful little beggar wench!" she cried throatily, rapping the table noisily with her bony knuckles. "So this is her doing, is it! Don't lie to me, Robert Stetheril Ellis! I know all about it. She's one of those puritanical little hypocrites which God hates worse than a snake. She won't marry you because she's afraid of what people will say. And, so that no other girl can have you, she'll have you shut up in a prison. She's a confounded little . . ."

"Grandma!" he interjected. "Please . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" she cut him off. "Don't I know what a girl with a pretty face and an empty head can do? She can do anything in God Almighty's world she wants to with a man and make the fool think he's doing it himself all the time. Who is she to preach to you? If you're good enough for your own flesh and blood you're good enough for such as she is. But I'll show her! I'll show her, I tell you. I'll drive her out of the valley, I'll hound her through her life . . ."

"But I tell you that Enid hasn't even suggested this. Will you listen to me?"

"No I won't! I have listened to you long enough. You are talking like a crazy man. Let me talk. Let me tell you that you can't do this thing, that it is

sheer quixotic madness, driveling lunacy, that I won't let you do it! Do you hear?"

"I hear," he answered, seeking to speak quietly though his voice was shaking. "And I am sorry . . ."

"You had better think, Robert! I have made my will. One million dollars goes to Evelyn who is a little nincompoop but my grandniece; the rest goes to you. You can have it in your own name tomorrow if you want it. If you want to play fair and get square with the world you can go out and do it in ten thousand ways that will be sensible and that will do good."

But he shook his head.

"You are wonderfully good to me, Grandma," he answered. "And I don't know that I am not mad. But, to square myself, to pay off my own debt, there is just the one way. I have heard of a prince who retained a servant to take his floggings for him, but I have never heard of its doing the prince or the servant or anybody else any good."

"Good?" she sniffed. "And what good is to come out of your getting yourself shut up in jail? Unless it's good to drag your name and mine, your father's and your mother's, through the mud! Unless it's good to wreck your own life just when you're coming into it! Unless it's good to slap me in the face with your senseless actions! Robert, you're a sentimental fool."

"I rather think I am, Grandma," he said, seeking to smile and speak gently. "But I can't help it. You ask what good it will do? None, I suppose, for anybody in the world but me. One half of the

world that knows me will say I'm a crook; the other will say I'm insane. And I'll know that I've done all that I can do to square myself."

"Don't you think of anyone but yourself?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. Otherwise I should have given myself up a week ago. But I can't help it. I haven't the right to help it. I . . . I've got to pay, Grandma . . . "

The flush had long ago gone out of his cheeks, something of the feverish glitter from his eye. He was deathly pale, a feeling almost of physical nausea over him, like the emotion which would ride a man forced to the brutal, physical attack of one who had befriended him and whom he loved. But he was no less determined now than at the beginning.

Rachel Stetheril, who in her time had set her foot upon the necks of many men and women and who in a long life had learned much, knew when she had played the last card in her hand and when the trick was lost. Into her heart surged wave after wave of weariness and hopelessness and sick sorrow. She knew that what this boy said he would do he would do. And she realized somewhat vaguely, for she did not welcome the realization, that there was much of bitter truth in what he had said about one's paying in full. She, herself, was paying now, she had paid heavily through the lonely years, for the wrong she had done her own daughter — seeking to force a stubborn will upon a character no less determined. She had paid, she was still paying, she would continue to pay until at last the gods of human destiny had decreed that the score was wiped out.

But her heart was bitter and grew bitterer. The knowledge that, after all, the present situation, no less than the boy's lawless past, was a result of her own harshness with her own flesh and blood, was not the sort of knowledge to be accepted calmly by Rachel Stetheril. It but fed fuel to her anger. And the bitterness which was seeking within her soul to humble her she tore out and flung upon her grandson and Enid Camden. In the instant she was swept back from the latter day of lavender to that of somber black. She railed at him as he had almost forgotten she could.

"You're an ingrate and a conceited, selfish puppy!" she cried angrily. "You are a liar and a hypocrite! As for that miserable slut of a girl, I pray God some day he will make her as miserable as you have made me. Listen to me; I swear in God's name that I am giving you your last chance right now. Forget this nonsense and I'll forget it. I command you to forget it! If you refuse to obey me, I disown you and disinherit you and spit on you! Not a cent of mine will I leave to you if you ever see Enid Camden again or if you go on with this fool's madness."

She ended her passionate tirade sharply. The boy, his head bowed a little, sighed.

"You won't do as I tell you to? You won't even reconsider?" she asked stiffly.

"Grandma," he began, "oh, Grandma! I am sorry . . ."

"That will do!" she cut in curtly.

She put out her hand to the bell. To Carter, who came immediately, she said colorlessly,

"Carter, show this gentleman out. And see that

he doesn't take anything which doesn't belong to him!"

She was old enough to be forgiven much, even that. But he was too young to forgive in haste. His head lifted proudly he turned and left the room. From behind thick curtains she watched him go down the steps, turn into the open road. Her mouth was set, her eyes were intensely black. With a firm, quick step, she went to her own room.

Carter, having watched the going of the Young Master and the passing down the hall of the old woman, shook his head.

"They hold their heads just the same," he told himself with impressive confidence. "Just the same."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DECISION OF LADYFINGERS

ENID had shut the gates to the insistent knocking of her love, and the knowledge of what she had done made the days longer for her, the nights slow, weary hours. Days passed and she did not see him of whom she was thinking constantly. She had assumed a responsibility greater than she yet knew and the thing which she had done saddened her. And still she was not utterly miserable. For virtue does bring its own reward; a noble resolution firmly taken spreads a warm glow of satisfaction through the mental being; the sense of self-sacrifice is not and never has been without a complementary sense of self-praise. He who casts himself down for a deathless principle feels somewhere within the vague borders of his consciousness that he has raised himself. The martyr's final emotion has in it more of pure triumph than has that of the tyrant who has condemned him.

The girl saw clearly that she had lifted her hand against the happiness of the man she loved no less than against her own. So she was sad, very sad. But she was sustained by the certainty that she had done right. Neither the Wallaces with whom she lived nor the pupils over whom she reigned in her

little kingdom of affection saw in the Enid of today any difference from the Enid of yesterday. Youth and health bested sorrow in their war of the roses in her cheeks; she smiled often upon the children in her care; she made no one the sadder for the grief which had struck deep within her but which had not paralyzed.

The Wallaces, kind, sympathetic country folk, had known Enid long and of late had come to love her and Ronnie almost as they loved their own handful of romping, robust children. When word came to them that something had gone wrong at the Big House, that the young heir had gone away and no one knew where, they did not speak of it to her, fearing to hurt her. Both Bud Wallace and Mary had talked the matter over in many a secret session, and the conclusion had been that Enid already knew and would not care to talk of it. So it happened that she was one of the last in the valley to hear of it.

After that, days and nights were longer, her heart wearier. There were times when her longing for him was a passionate thing which she could not fight down, when she heeded the question her heart asked her, when she lost a little of the sense of triumph, when she was not certain that she had done right at all. That he had gone with no word to her hurt her at first as much as did the fact of his going. Where was he now? What was he making of his life? He had sought to begin this life anew, had asked her to live it with him. She had refused. Had he gone back to the old existence? If so, who was rightly to blame? As a boy he had never had his chance; growing into manhood she who loved him had turned

away from him. Instead of acting nobly had she after all just been a pitiful little coward, afraid of shadows?

And then came definite word and throughout the black hours of the night Enid lay weeping the bitterest tears of her life. The world had come tumbling about her ears and it had been her hand that had sent a splendid edifice tottering into chaotic ruin. Had she in some fit of madness plunged a knife into his heart she could not have knelt in deeper remorse over his pale body than she knelt now in the darkness of her bed-room. The news had come to her late in the afternoon. Early the next morning, white faced and with terror in her eyes, she went to Rachel Stetheril.

"Tell me," she cried without foreword of greeting, unmindful alike of Carter's curious stare and the vicious anger in the old woman's eyes, "is this thing true?"

"You've come at last, have you?" Mrs. Stetheril sneered back at her. "Well, I'm glad of it. Yes; it's true. It's your work. I hope you are satisfied with it!"

The case of the State of California *versus* Robert Stetheril Ellis, *alias* Bobbie Ashe, *alias* Ladyfingers, had been tried before Judge Daniels in San Francisco, verdict found, sentence pronounced. There had been no cause for delay; the trial was unusually short. The defendant was a defendant merely in the technical sense of the word; voluntarily he had put all necessary evidence into the hands of the prosecution, pleading "Guilty." The lawyer appointed by the court had spoken to the judge rather than to

the jury, making a simple plea for mercy. The jury, their duty plain, had been out less than ten minutes. Judge Daniels, because of the convicted man's youth, taking also into consideration the fact that he had given himself up when there was no case against him, had made the sentence as light as he felt commensurate with the magnitude of the offenses committed. It was two years in a state prison.

Until the last minute Enid clung to the hope which dies so hard, telling herself that the papers had lied. Now that Rachel Stetheril cruel-handedly killed that hope the girl felt that she could go mad, that she would go mad. Dread pictures which throughout the night had taken shape before her eyes and which she had sought to banish by telling herself that this horrid thing was not true, came back now more real than the realities about her. She saw him alone in the courtroom, friendless, a man among wolves. She saw him shut in a narrow cell. She saw him lift his head and stand white faced, with hardened lips, as the jury said: "Guilty!" She saw him as the judge condemned him to the horror of a penitentiary . . .

Robert in a penitentiary! Bobbie Ashe, Ladyfingers, the boy-man who had been so gay and lighthearted, denied the thing he loved so passionately, his freedom. Enid's body was shaking, her eyes were hard and dry and terrible.

"Why did you let him do it?" she asked with sudden vehemence.

"You made him do it," repeated the old woman with merciless desire to cut again at a heart already torn. "Are you proud of your work?"

Enid stared at her.

"I . . . I did it," she answered faintly. "Yes. I was afraid. I was a fool and a coward and worse. I have ruined his life. Oh, I wish to God I could do now what Polly did for him!"

Two spots of color had come into the withered cheeks of Rachel Stetheril, in her eyes was the glitter of hard steel.

"Yes," she said coldly, "you have ruined his life. You haven't done much to make mine happier. I trust you have done a thorough job and ruined your own. I suppose, though, you'll be marrying some farmer boy by this time next year . . ."

"I will wait for him always," said Enid quietly. "When he wants me he can have me. If he never wants me I shall love him just the same and want to see him find happiness somewhere. But I can do nothing but wait. It is you who must help him now!"

"I?" said Mrs. Stetheril stiffly.

"You have money and money is power!" cried Enid eagerly. "You can get a new trial . . . Oh, I don't know how it is done, but you can do it. You can get the governor interested; you can have him pardoned! You can get the best lawyer in the state and he will find the way to save him from this . . ."

"Carter," called the old woman, "show this person out. And, if she ever calls again, I am not at home."

"You mean," cried Enid, "that you won't try?"

Rachel Stetheril whirled upon her menacingly, the old black stick clutched in shaking hands.

"I mean," she screamed, her voice breaking, the

spots growing redder upon her cheeks, "that I have done with you and him! If I could annul his sentence by the turn of my hand I would not turn it. Had he had a drop of humanity in his blood he would not have done this damned thing; had he an ounce of affection for me or gratitude, he would not have done it. He had nothing but his mad infatuation for you with your soft skin and fawn's eyes and he won't have even that left him by the time his two years are done. He isn't the kind to love anything for two years. He'll come out and be a thief again and laugh at you. And it will be you, you who has driven him down to hell!"

"It would have been better for him if I had never been born," said Enid slowly. "Oh, I know . . . now! Now that it is too late! And he has done only more harm by giving himself up, hurting you, hurting himself. But I was only a little fool, after all, and he is only a boy who sought to do the right thing. You are old, you are wiser and stronger than we, you can make allowances for him, you can forgive him, you can help him now."

"Neither now nor hereafter," was the curt answer. "I want never to see him again. Nor you."

"But," pleaded Enid stubbornly, "he is your own grandson, he . . ."

"He is a thief whom you would not marry," snapped the old woman. "Kindly remember that and don't ask me to accept the persons you are above. Carter!"

It was Wednesday morning, hence a school day. Enid with slow steps went forth from the Big House. Carter, following her to the door, whispered a few

kind words which she did not hear. She walked listlessly down the graveled walk, her wide-opened eyes seeing nothing of the orchard lands and grain fields about her.

It was a bloodless automaton who opened school at nine o'clock. She had not even the thought of declaring a holiday; she was not conscious of a desire to be alone. She had not breakfasted; at noon she received with a faint smile the dainty luncheon which the thoughtful Mary Wallace had sent her. She did not eat it. She rang the bell at a quarter of one, again at one o'clock, and took up the work for the afternoon listlessly. An atmosphere of uneasiness hung over the school; the children could not study and found no pleasure in taking advantage of Miss Enid's obvious preoccupation.

After school she did not go directly home. She turned, instead, into the fields and toward the wooded hills. She found the spot where she had first seen Robert Ellis, where he had been lost, where, though she did not know it, he had spent many hours alone upon the day when she had last seen him. Again she saw the pictures of her fancy, more real than the realities about her. She saw him as he had stood that day, the light dancing in his eyes, the frankness of his sunny nature turned to her.

"Bobbie!" she whispered.

He had loved the forests so; he had so loved his liberty. And because there was something which he loved more than forest and freedom, he had given them up. There was an intolerable pain in the girl's heart as she threw herself down where he had lain that day. She lay very still. It was long before

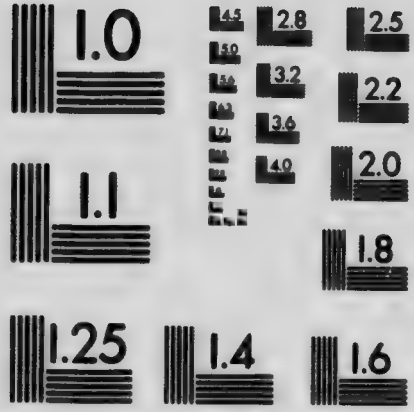
the tears came, bitter tears of one who accuses and convicts herself of having betrayed her lover.

Tired out, she at last went to sleep, lying in the grass. She dreamed of him, thought that he was holding her in his arms, that her arms were tight about his neck. It was cold when she woke; the dusk had crept into the woods; there was a smear of clouds across the sky; the world was dim and cheerless and very, very empty.

It was a week before she wrote to him, before she could see how she must write. Then she told him very simply, "I love you, dear. Oh, more than ever now, and since you first came my heart has been full of you. And I want you to try to forgive me. And I want you to know that if you want me I will wait for you and that I want you; that if you don't want me any more I shall not wonder. God only knows how I wish it were all to be done over! . . . And I am not afraid any longer."

Enid's piteous little note found its way in due time into the enclosure of prison walls. To Robert Ellis it came like a little bird, singing, like an azure winged messenger. It was the first word from Enid. And it said, "I love you; I will wait for you; I am not afraid any longer!" Founded upon such words a lover's soul might build up a golden palace safe from the rude eyes and hands of the prison warden.

It is not humanly possible for one to dwell constantly upon the emotional heights from which so many a flinty trail leads downward through the mists



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

of doubt into the valleys of anguish. Enid through a strong revulsion of feeling had come to see in her own action something negatively if not positively criminal; Robert had known days and nights when there was lost to him that sustaining sense of triumph which is the martyrs' staff, when he saw in himself the quixotic idiot his grandmother had called him. The district attorney to whom he had given himself up in San Francisco had bluntly accused him of having some shrewd and selfish purpose to serve in this seemingly ingenuous surrender, and studied him suspiciously; the lawyer whom the Court had appointed to defend him admitted himself in puzzled doubt whether to look upon his client as most insane or cunning. Acting upon impulses which, after all, were quite simple and natural, he was credited in some quarters with being very deep, in others with being the reverse. Not a single word of praise or of encouragement had come to him from any source whatever; and while a man may perform a high act with utter unselfishness and fortitude and fervor, he remains thereafter merely what he was before, a man and not a god, to whom a sympathetic word is wine and honey. The very day upon which Enid's letter came to him Robert had been surrendering to moody regret, cursing himself for a fool. But the girl's simple words were like her own dear cool hand on his hot brow; he closed his eyes and pictured her waiting for him; knew that he had done the right thing; dared look beyond the end of two years; in the spirit, walked with her again through the "good greenwood." There were days to come when he was keenly unhappy, restless, filled with passing cynicism, but no

more days when he surrendered absolutely to sullen regret.

He knew that a man, by good behavior, might curtail the days of his imprisonment. Each day was a link in the iron chain which held him back from Enid and life in the open, and with steady purpose he sought to knock off link after link, shortening his term. He learned swiftly that here in an atmosphere of gloom and suspicion it was a rare joy to find a man cheerful and trustworthy. There were men wearing the stripes who came to like him more than they liked anything else in the world; there were those among the guards who formed friendships for him. Life rested heavy and black upon his spirit, for he was but a convict like the rest and like them but human. But so long as Enid was thinking of him and waiting for him the darkness of the present was never again pitch black, for through it he could see the fairy fires of the future.

Enid, until word came from him, was like one stricken dumb. Her eyes were deep pools of sorrow, her face a white agony. She did not talk of her grief, did not call upon others for sympathy; nor yet did she seek to conceal what she felt. Hardly less than Robert Ellis's was her soul isolated from companionship. But when his simple answer to her letter came, when he assured her, "I will come first of all to you when I am free," a new look came into her eyes. The listlessness fell away from her like a discarded garment to be trodden upon. She became earnestly and not unhappily active.

She knew that she was pretty and that Robert loved her loveliness. The beauty which God had

given her she but held in trust for Robert against the day of his coming. She must not greet him with pale, drawn face and sorrowful, lack-luster eyes. She must treasure for him her youth and the freshness of youth. It was not a crime for her to seek to be cheerful with him away; it was a command dictated by love.

She went again to see Rachel Stetheril, hoping that as time passed the old woman's anger would cool. She knew that Mrs. Stetheril had weighty influence in Sacramento as elsewhere; that a word from her in the governor's ear might bring pardon or parole. But she was turned away at the door. She wrote. Her letter came back with a curt request from Mrs. Stetheril's newest secretary that she cease to call or write. She called at Evelyn's and Evelyn's own voice came to her coldly, instructing the white-aproned maid to say that she was not at home. She went to Bond at the bank. He was plainly embarrassed. He liked Ellis, he had a strong affection for Enid. He would have liked to help. But . . . and Enid came to understand it before she left . . . Evelyn and Rachel Stetheril and the Stetheril millions commanded him to take no action.

Not until she had gone to Sacramento herself and had found the governor's ear did she know that she had done all that she could do. He listened to her, made a note of the case, assured her that he would give it his attention. As a matter of fact he did investigate carefully, more than a little impressed by the girl's appeal. But in the end he saw no sufficient reason to shorten a term made mercifully brief in the first place by Judge Daniels.

But not yet was Enid's activity at an end. She resigned herself to waiting but in the meantime her house must be set in order against the coming of her lover. Her mother had returned to the valley and had taken a little cottage in Lockworth where mother, daughter, and Ronnie now lived together. Mrs. Camden had invested her small fortune under Arnold Bond's supervision and it had grown so that now she had no need for Enid's help financially. Out of her monthly salary of seventy-five dollars Enid put into the bank never less than forty-five. From the eight months' school term she meant to save at least four hundred dollars. Upon Saturdays and Sundays she gave music lessons here and there in the valley. She economized in little things, planning to have to her credit a savings bank account of five hundred dollars at the end of the school year.

Arnold Bond, a bit ashamed of himself for having failed to aid her in Robert's case, sought to help her now. He was not going to lose sight of the Stetheril money and he was not going to oppose Mrs. Stetheril openly. But no one but he and Enid need know how he advised her. When she had some two hundred dollars he saved her from what she came to see later was a mad bit of speculation. From that time on Enid was caution itself.

For when Robert should have his freedom she knew that he would have nothing else. There would come hard days; every dollar she saved now would be a golden rung in their ladder later on.

So all that there was of the practical in Enid's nature rose to the surface. When she had saved three hundred dollars she did invest. A chance

rumor had suggested an opportunity and she went to Bond with it, fired with enthusiasm. He looked into the matter for her and in the end advised her to go ahead. There were fifty acres of farming lands upon the eastern edge of the valley to be had at forty dollars an acre. Enid bought the place, paying out her three hundred dollars and contracting for monthly payments of seventeen dollars and interest. The night that she carried her contract home was the happiest night Enid had known since she had learned that her lover was Ladyfingers. During the day it had been her practical being which had triumphed. But, with the coming of the night, her emotional self thrilled to the joy born of a girl's sentiment: the corner of the land she had bought, her land and Robert's, ran into the wooded foothills and included the spot where, once upon a time, she had come upon him, lost . . .

Month after month now she paid her seventeen dollars and interest; month after month she put aside another twenty or twenty-five dollars. Of all this no word came to Robert. He knew that she was well, that she thought of him and waited for him; that she was teaching. He did not know that she found some measure of joy in her home building for them both; that time and time again she walked to that spot in the woods and carried paper and pencil with her; that it was not mere money she was laying aside in the bank but potential rafters and joists and doors and windows of the cottage-to-be.

There were in the world many men and women who, during those slow passing months, were vastly more unhappy than Robert and Enid. He who can dream dreams is slave to no man or condition.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE HOUSE IN THE WOOD

WHILE Enid kept her glorious secret from Robert, no less did he keep from her any word of his own glad news. Not once did he say to her, "I am shortening the time of waiting by every possible day and hour." He would come to her before she should expect him; just when the latter days were longest and most filled with impatience he would come without warning and she would turn and find him, smiling at her elbow.

And at last the day came when the gates swung open for him and he passed out into the sunlit world. His heart leaped up at the kiss of the wind upon his cheek, his eyes shone with the clean splendor of the fields, he stood straighter than he had stood for many months, he felt like a prince come into his own. He had squared himself; he had paid off his score; life was just beginning; Enid was waiting.

Another man might have gone forth with his head down, muttering, "I am an ex-convict. There is a brand upon me which my fellow men will never for one little second fail to see. I have my fight to fight with no weapon in my hand, with a weary weight upon my shoulders." But Robert Ellis's chin was lifted, his eyes brightened with the

promise of the world. Within his heart his old love of life sang as it had never sung before, a song of tumultuous happiness rising to his lips that moved with it, a lover's chant: "Life is at the beginning; Enid is waiting."

The heavy months of incarceration had not been profitless. They had brought him their adventures, they had tested his soul. He had gone down into terrible, night-filled abysses where he had drunk of bitter waters. Down there he had fought shadow shapes which mocked him, hydra-headed evils eluding, threatening, breathing devastation. He had gone forth upon the old quicksands and they had clutched at his feet, seeking to drag him down to a burial among whitened bones and noisome things. He had floundered in blind despair like a man lost in the dripping mist over a bog. He had climbed to great heights and found a rare glory above the clouds; he had looked down and seen Robert Ellis; he had looked into the world with eyes which had grown more thoughtful and which saw deeper and clearer. In the end, scarred and battle worn, he walked forth like a young conqueror going to his triumph. And down in Sacramento the Governor, who had been touched by Enid's plea and who had not forgotten the case of Ladyfingers, had set his name to a paper which was put into Robert's hands twenty-four hours before his shortened term had expired. It was a pardon kindly intended, not to lessen punishment, but to do all that might be done to reestablish young Ellis on the plane of other men with clean slates.

God *was* in His heaven! All *was* right with the

world! It was right that there should be sin in the world, else it would not be there. It was right that there should be sorrow; sorrow cut deep into the body as with a sword and thereafter soothed and softened as with a kiss. The man who "would tear the world to bits and remould it nearer to his heart's desire," was but a child thrusting a stick into the finely balanced wheels of a watch. The man who has not drunk of life's goblet of grief never k[illegible]e thrill to the palate of joy's sparkling v[illegible] Thus the old philosophical platitudes [illegible]nvested with vital significance for him. If he was still something of a boy he was already very much of a man.

Train schedules seemed made for his convenience that day, great railway systems bowing to the wishes of the young prince quite as gracefully as the trees and flowers inclined themselves. He came into Lockworth about three o'clock in the afternoon. The few miles to Enid's school he could walk by a little after four o'clock. He would find her alone there or, perhaps, would meet her as she drove homeward.

Time and again his heart rose into his throat as some cart or old top buggy bore down upon him in its attendant cloud of dust. But long before each had come abreast of him he knew that he must wait a little longer. He had learned from her letters that she drove an old bay mare whose name was Mary . . . named for Mary Wallace by Bud before the first Wallace baby had come . . . and that she rode high upon the jerking seat of a cart which, until you grew used to it, made you sea-

sick. He had a keen eye fo. an old bay mare and a swaying cart, and a dozen times pictured to himself Enid's face under a wide straw hat looking down at him. He got to the schoolhouse, found it locked and Enid gone. And most positively she had not met and passed him upon the road.

He looked in at an unshuttered window. Everywhere were signs of her, a glove upon a table holding the form of her fingers, a vase of flowers, her own writing upon the blackboard, informing him, by way of greeting, that, "*The rat can run. The cat can run. The cat can catch the rat!*" It was all interesting, but it was not Enid. He went back down the knoll, wondering.

A farmer in a big wagon came by, driving toward Lockworth. Robert hailed him, asking if by any chance he had seen Miss Camden.

"Up to the old Forsyth place," the farmer informed him, swinging about upon his high seat to point toward the foothills. "Over yonder. Just met her half a mile back. Turn to your right at the next crossroads, take the path by the red windmill over there, go through them gum trees, and you can see the place. Giddap there, Babe! Blackie, just you get your old fool head under that tongue again and I'll knock it off."

And away went Babe, Blackie, farmer, and wagon leaving Robert Ellis with a vague impression of something's head and something else's tongue with the farmer ready to knock something off. But Enid had gone on ahead to the "old Forsyth place," which only latterly had become the new "Enid Camden place," and Robert hastened on.

And as he came to understand where he would find her the spirit of joyousness which had led him all day assumed a new radiance. All was right with the world; but was God in His Heaven? Had He, rather, not come down to earth to work miracles in young love's name? For Robert and Enid were going to meet for the first time after this long separation in the very woods where first they had met.

Robert was hurrying faster than he knew when he came through the oaks, turning into the winding path, cresting a little rise, plunging down into the very nook. Then, suddenly, he stopped and frowned. There was the big hollow oak from whose blackened cavern Ronnie, the Indian hunter, had first appeared. And set square in front of it was a house! This was sacrilege. A hideous house, he told himself angrily; a miserable little hut, a despicable eyesore, set by some outrageous infidel in the heart of holy land.

But he went on. Under a tree was an old bay mare hitched to a cart. His heart was thumping wildly. Enid was in the house, of course, calling upon the idiots who had built here.

He came to the door. He did not knock. There was little need. In one quick flash he saw and, with love's instinct, understood.

It was a one-room house, with a wide porch running on four sides, with a screened-in sleeping room. It was not yet completed. The walls were of plain, surfaced pine, with battens covering the cracks. Someone was working there, Someone very busy with paint brush just now, staining the bare walls

so that no longer were they bare in the seeming, but warm-tinted. That Someone had her hair tossed out of the way over her shoulder in a glorious copper brown braid curling at the ends; she had her back to the door; she was singing softly to herself. Robert stood very still, lifting his arms to her.

She turned. Perhaps to seek another spot that needed the application of the warm-tinted stain, perhaps because her heart had heard the call of his.

"Robert!" she gasped. "Robert!"

She stood staring at him, paint bucket in one hand, brush in the other. And he came in at one joyous bound and took her into his arms, paint bucket, brush, and all.

"Robert!" she cried again, breathlessly. "You didn't run away? You are not . . ."

"I am free!" he told her happily. "Free, dear, dear Enid! I have come to stay. And . . . Oh, my God, my dear, you have grown lovelier than ever and I love you ten thousand times more than I thought I did!"

"But," she insisted, "it isn't the end of . . . of your term! I have counted the days. . . ."

"And I have shortened the time by being a good boy!" he laughed at her. "It has been good training, Enid. It will make your work easier for you! Only why don't you put your arms around me and let me know that you love me as I love you?"

"Let me go, Robert!" she panted.

"But why? Soon, dear?"

"Let me go. Just a minute," she pleaded. "Please."

He obeyed. She put down her paint bucket and brush. Then she lifted her wondering eyes to his. Slowly the wonder went out of them as they filled utterly with her great happiness. Then she came to him and put her arms about his neck as again he drew her close, close to him.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered.

Together they went through the house. Hand in hand they made their tour of inspection. Before the fireplace he kissed her; at the little table set out already "for the companionship of it" with pipes and tobacco and a few books he filled, he kissed her again. Before every bit of work that had come from her hand his love for her soared higher, the happiness in her breast fluttered to fresh planes. And at last, his arm about her, they went outside to look at their "home."

He had already forgotten his first impression of it. The "wretched hut" had been swept away and into oblivion; in its place stood a miniature palace, glorious, golden, marvelous to look upon.

"And you made it!" he said reverently as though it were the great masterpiece of a great artist.

"Oh, I had carpenters," she hurried to tell him.

He laughed. He laughed at everything, anything. And so did she.

"But you worked and made the money and paid for it! And you have paid hundreds of dollars for the land. And we are going to be real farmers, you and I, and raise . . . raise . . . We'll raise pumpkins!" he ended triumphantly. "I've always had a perfect mania to raise pumpkins."

Within ten minutes they had told each other

the story of many long months. There were times when both spoke together. But both heard and understood.

And then, being both of them headlong young people, intoxicated with the glory of the world, divinely mad, they did the only sensible thing in the world. They got into the swaying cart and drove the old mare at her liveliest clip into Lockworth. They bought coffee and bacon and eggs and sugar and canned milk and bread and a whole box of assorted tinned things and they got married. It was all a sort of frenzied jumble; they seemed racing against time; life for the moment resolved itself into an amazing medley of groceries and license and minister and a substitute to finish the term of Enid's school for her and a little sack of salt forgotten until the last minute and no end of things.

Robert Ellis gave the minister a dollar and ten cents.

"It's all I've got left," he grinned widely. "The rest went for coffee and bacon and a license."

Then they went back "home."

In the morning a little bird, singing joyously, woke them. So they began their honeymoon. As they looked out into the heart of the woods . . . their woods . . . the day was dawning.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE PATH TO THE DOOR

TO Robert and Enid, hand in hand and heart in heart, was coming the fulness of living. Until now there had been preparation and promise and at times dread; now came fulfilment. Before, their lives had been in the bud; now were they in full bloom. All of which means, perhaps, that for them life itself, that glorious, golden, God-given thing, had taken on a new, deeper, more vital meaning. No longer was it constructed for them of negligible episodes; each incident, no matter how trifling to an alien eye, was to them of vast importance. To breathe, to move, to see the common sights about them, to hear a bird sing or to listen to the water falling in the pools of the creek, these were all wonderful experiences and adventures. They had come to understand how exquisite a joy it is just to live.

They were happy. Their love was not of that cheap fabric which frays and grows dim-hued at the end of a brief honeymoon. From the beginning lovers, they never ceased to be friends. Companions in their souls they never ceased to be lovers. They lived all that they could, alone together in their woods. Life was good to them, infinitely tender.

Not that they dwelt upon serene heights above the world of care. Days came when Enid's grey eyes were wet and her brave heart misgave her, days came when Robert sought tomorrow with a look almost of fear in his eyes. For, after all, they were just at the beginning of life, and that great common roadway is at times choked with dust for all its wayfarers, at times broken and flinty underfoot, here and there cut across with chasms which threaten, spanned with bare, cold ridges. And man and maid who elect to make their journey side by side, even though their love be pure and strong and eternal, must travel the one great highway.

It had been Robert Ellis's expectation to have worked for a year or so before marrying, so that he could have saved up some small sum for their "nest egg." But Enid was not afraid and Enid, having worked hard and earned money, was ready now to put herself into his care, to let him become the bread winner. Supported by his old optimism he was no more afraid than Enid. He had nothing, but he would find the way to support his wife modestly for a little while, then as befitted her.

Thus they entered into the strong, bright light of full day. He went forth happily from their little home and sought work. This, in itself, was for him an adventure! He grinned when he asked for his first job. And he got it, too. Perhaps his grin helped him. He worked in a hay field day after day for a week; he blistered his hands and his white, sensitive fingers stiffened and hardened. He came home at night knowing what bodily fatigue might mean. But he earned his two dollars

and a half per day! Fifteen dollars a week! He was proud of it. And so was Enid. And Enid was proud of his calloused hands for no longer were they the hands of Ladyfingers.

At the end of the week he lost his place. He didn't know why. The other men had been kept; work was still going on. He wondered if he had failed somehow and asked the farmer who had hired him. The man seemed embarrassed and escaped without answering.

Thereafter some nine or ten days passed during which he did little beyond seek for work and fail to get it. He put in a part of each of these days improving their own ranch. He didn't want to touch another cent of the money Enid had put by.

During the months which passed he did whatever came to his hand and did it cheerfully, and thereby failed to bring in quite enough money for his and Enid's tiny expenses. It was Enid's reserve fund which paid each month the seventeen dollars and interest for their home. Neither of them lost hope, both knew that in the end it must come out right, somehow. But it hurt the man to see Enid doing without little things he felt it her birthright to have, it hurt his pride not to be able to do more and better for her, it hurt her to see him battle with life barehanded and suffer so many a defeat.

Enid, with a great assumption of carelessness, suggested that she teach another term; when she saw the look in his eyes she came to him and put her arms about him and laid her cheek against his. And they said nothing further about it.

He did everything that he could find to do. He chopped wood and devoted his evenings to turning out some little lyrics which he trusted he might sell to some of the eastern magazines. Editors kept them long periods of time and returned them. He worked in a hardware store for several days, and then was dismissed. He didn't know why, although he began to suspect. He got a job driving a delivery wagon for the chief grocery store in Lockworth and brought parcels to the back door of the Big House and to Evelyn's home. A querulous old woman upon the edge of the valley learned of his record and immediately informed the grocer that his driver had stolen an egg out of the first dozen he had brought. The grocer, who had come to like his driver, told him of the matter as a rare joke. Even Robert was amused by it. Enid's eyes grew as hard as diamonds and her two fists clenched.

So it went. For six months Enid was hard beset to keep Robert from understanding just how keen their privation was. But they were happy. Happy even under the contemptuous, cold stare Evelyn Daly Bond bestowed upon them when a couple of times they chanced to meet her in town. Happy even under the glare of old Rachel Stetheril who had neither forgotten nor forgiven. Happy though there were times when it was hard to be happy.

Such a time came when Robert lost his place as delivery boy. The grocer apologized and explained. Mrs. Stetheril had sent word that she would discontinue her orders; Mrs. Bond had sent similar word. Robert could understand?

A little, but not all. It was not within him to understand how Rachel Stetheril's old anger had grown and rankled; how she had come to hate Enid for the pure and simple and all-sufficient reason that she was jealous of her.

"He left me for that damned hussy!" the old woman cried over and over in her heart. "And now he's flaunting her in my face! By God, I'll drive the two of them out of the country!"

When Enid's little savings account was exhausted they were forced to mortgage their equity in their home. Bond, a friend to them in his heart, arranged the matter and at a low rate of interest, merely cautioning them to "say nothing about it." Frantically did Robert strive to increase his earnings. It was what is known as a bad year. Rachel Stetheril's open animosity made matters worse. A look of worry came often into Robert's eyes. Enid, after her frank way, came to him one day and put her arms about him and said,

"Rob, no matter what happens, if things get worse instead of better . . . if I were starving, even," she added for emphasis with a little laugh that did not ring any too mirthful . . . "you will never . . . you won't be tempted to . . ."

"No, my dear," he answered her steadily. "For your sake. Your sake and . . . Its!"

For their baby was coming to them. And Enid was never afraid again.

There came the time when they could understand that God had been good to them in giving them those six months of struggle side by side. For by the time the baby came the look of worry

had gone from Robert's eyes. In the little things he had made good. And fortune was breaking into a smile of glad promise. He had sold a lyric for fifteen dollars; he had sold another and a third. All within the year. And he had made friends. Lockworth began to boast of him. He had a place with the Lockworth paper. He wrote a column each day; a bit of light verse once a week, and, in spare time, he helped with the advertising. When the baby came, a boy promptly named Robert, there was an imported nurse in the house under the watchful eye of Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock and Robert, Senior, had money in his pocket!

If there is anything else in the world quite as proud and conceited and vaingloriously happy as a young father, I don't know what it is. The girl-mother accepted her happiness as a very natural thing; Robert was delirious with it. Enid was all right; that was the first thing of which he demanded to be assured an infinite number of times. And then the Baby! At first he was overjoyed just to be informed that it was a normal baby in all respects. God alone knows what anticipatory fears the young father is subject to! His dreads obsess him through the dark hours of waiting. He trembles for fear that it may not have the regulation number of arms or legs; that its ears and eyes may be misplaced, their very positions transposed even; the terrified thought of a possible tail or some other monstrosity is not unknown to him. But once assure him that the child is normal, and his chest expands and he looks upon you as an idiot who cannot see that this baby is by far the

most wonderfully perfect baby ever born into the world.

So for them life now entered a new phase. Robert's keen eyes made out that Enid was as beautiful as ever, more beautiful, in sober fact; that the roses came back to her cheeks and the laughter to her eyes; that in no dread fashion had she grown older in a day; that she began to look younger; that the nurse suspected she was only seventeen! And there in her arms was a baby, her baby, his baby, little Robert!

Arnold Bond called to see them. This, like the matter of the mortgage, was to remain *sub rosa*. He sat and looked at Enid and the baby and for a long, long while said nothing. He just marveled. He asked in a hesitant fashion to be allowed to hold it a moment. He wrung Robert's hand hard as he went away.

"You ought to be mighty happy," he said.

"I am," said Robert.

The imported, high-salaried, and extremely efficient nurse was a mere mortal. She burned her finger one day and said, "Damn!" This in the presence of the baby who turned speculative eyes upon her. The baby was two weeks old. Robert called the nurse into the next room. With dignified and impressive severity he cautioned her against allowing such a thing to occur again. One could not be too careful of the impressions made upon children at early ages.

Robert Ellis, Senior, was editor-in-chief of the *Lockworth Independent*. Enid had to be careful nowadays not to speak in terms of praise of any-

thing under the sun which she did not want immediately bought and sent home to her. She had now gone out of the house and down the footpath through the woods, to meet her husband who was coming home early today.

He held out his arms to her as he came through the trees, his eyes boyish, his smile boyish, his hair rumpled as he swept off his hat in greeting. She waited for him, her smile tender and glad. When he put his arms about her a little thrill ran through her whole body, an answering thrill through his.

Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock had brought Robert Ellis, Junior, into the world. The old fellow had adored Enid since the day he had brought her, too, into this life. Also he had come to have a great liking for the erstwhile Ladyfingers himself, for certain very definite reasons: the boy was likable and the old doctor's heart was a wide-open place of welcome for new loves; Robert's little lyrics appealed mightily to a sentimental old heart; and finally, here was another instance of old Rachel Stetheril's persecution. So, curling his mustaches fiercely, and chinking the metallic substances in his pocket, he went straight to the Big House and rocking on his high heels and small toes, he burst forth into denunciation of its mistress and her ways.

"It's a damned shame, madam!" he shouted at her. "What's that boy ever done to you that you should treat him as I wouldn't treat a cursed yellow dog? What has that sweet little girl done, that you should hound her as you've done? And that baby

of theirs, a year old today, and you haven't so much as laid eyes on it. Judas Priest, madam! Why, Rachel Stetheril, I'm ashamed of you. I . . ."

Rachel Stetheril, speechless so far before his unexpected gust of words, gasped at him and pounded her old stick on the floor dangerously near his toes and screamed back at him:

"Hold your tongue, you old fool! You dare to stand up before me and talk like that! You dare!"

"I dare anything," cried the old Colonel, withdrawing his toes but thrusting his fierce mustaches forward like stilettos. "It's a disgrace and I'm ashamed of you. The whole valley's ashamed of you. I . . . I . . ." He broke off, breathing hard and mopping his face with his big handkerchief.

Rachel Stetheril stood staring at him curiously

"You've the beard of a brigand, the eyes of a wolf," she said queerly, "and underneath you have the heart of a mooning old turtle-dove. You are a meddlesome, nose-poking old busybody and . . . Oh, come on, can't you? Come on."

She snatched at his sleeve, pounded the floor with her stick, and dragged him to the door. Outside Young Beeson was holding the carriage team in restive check. Carter stepped to his mistress's elbow; the marveling Colonel followed her; Young Beeson gave the horses their head and they were off. But where? wondered the Colonel. He did not dare hope.

At the edge of a wood Young Beeson stopped. He appeared to know the exact spot, though to the Colonel's staring eyes there was nothing to mark it.

Down climbed Rachel Stetheril, the dazed Colonel following. Never a house in sight.

She led the way, back from the road, through a meadow, up a gentle, brushy slope. There was a tiny trail under foot.

"I made it," said the old woman colorlessly, her hand on his arm. "It is the path of weary old feet, Colonel."

When they came to the crest of the knoll the path ended abruptly in a clump of bushes. Which was a stupid thing for a path to do, argued the Colonel, since plainly trails should lead somewhere and this one led nowhere. But Rachel Stetheril's hand, trembling just a little, parted the bushes so that they could look forth. And what they saw was the porch of the little house in which lived Robert and Enid and the baby, a porch flooded with sunshine.

"Every day," whispered the old woman, "she comes outside. She brings the baby. She puts it down on a quilt and watches it. It can crawl, Colonel. I am afraid she is going to let it walk before its little legs are strong enough. . . ."

"My God!" whispered the Colonel. "You have come this close, you have made a path as far as this, and you have never gone to them?"

She looked up at him with eyes suddenly hungry and wistful.

"Would they take me in? Would they drive me away? After all that I have done against them, would they take me in?"

The old Colonel trumpeted mightily into his handkerchief.

"They'd take the devil himself in," he grunted

indistinctly, "if he came as you do. Those two, why good God, Rachel Stetheril, they've hearts of gold!"

He broke a sudden way through the bushes and he and she, side by side, arm in arm, went through, making a fresh end to an old path so that at last it led somewhere. As they set foot on the porch, Robert and Enid came out of the cottage, Enid with the baby on her arm, Robert carrying the quilt. When they saw her they stopped and stared.

"Grandma!" cried Robert.

Enid was speechless. But it was to Enid's face that the hungry eyes went, it was Enid's soul they sought to read, it was to Enid that at last Rachel Stetheril spoke, crying out in a voice which had never been sharper, which had never fought so valiantly to hide an emotion:

"Oh, I know when I'm beaten! And I'm beaten now. For the first time in my wicked old life. I'm a villainous, selfish, grasping, despicable old woman and I know it as well as you do."

Enid's eyes were flooded with understanding, with sympathy, and with shining glasses.

"You mustn't say that," she beg[illegible].

But an uplifted stick cut her short as the old woman ran on hurriedly:

"In my wisdom I was a fool, in your ignorance you were wise. You knew that when one sinned he must pay. Haven't I sinned all my life long? Haven't I paid all my long life? And never have I been more wicked than this last year and never have I suffered so." Her voice broke a little; the yearning grew in her eyes which at last had gone to the

baby's face. "I have paid, paid, paid; over and over. In loneliness; in a loveless, barren life. Robert was right when he said that Polly paid; that Ambrose paid; that Haddon paid; he was right when he himself paid, and like a gentleman. So have I paid. And now, will you take me in with you? Or," and again her old voice hardened and she threw up her head with a sort of defiance infinitely sad, "will you slap my ugly old face and tell me to go?" In her nervousness she rapped as of old with her stick. "Answer me; which is it?"

For the moment they were beyond the power of words. But even so Enid knew what to do. She came forward quickly, her eyes wet but smiling, and into the old empty arms of Rachel Stetheril she put her baby. For an instant the old woman was terrified; she felt that her wrinkled, twitching face would make the baby cry. But when the baby, who was too young perhaps to read the harsh lines and not old enough to fail to read the heart, laughed, it was Rachel Stetheril herself who cried.